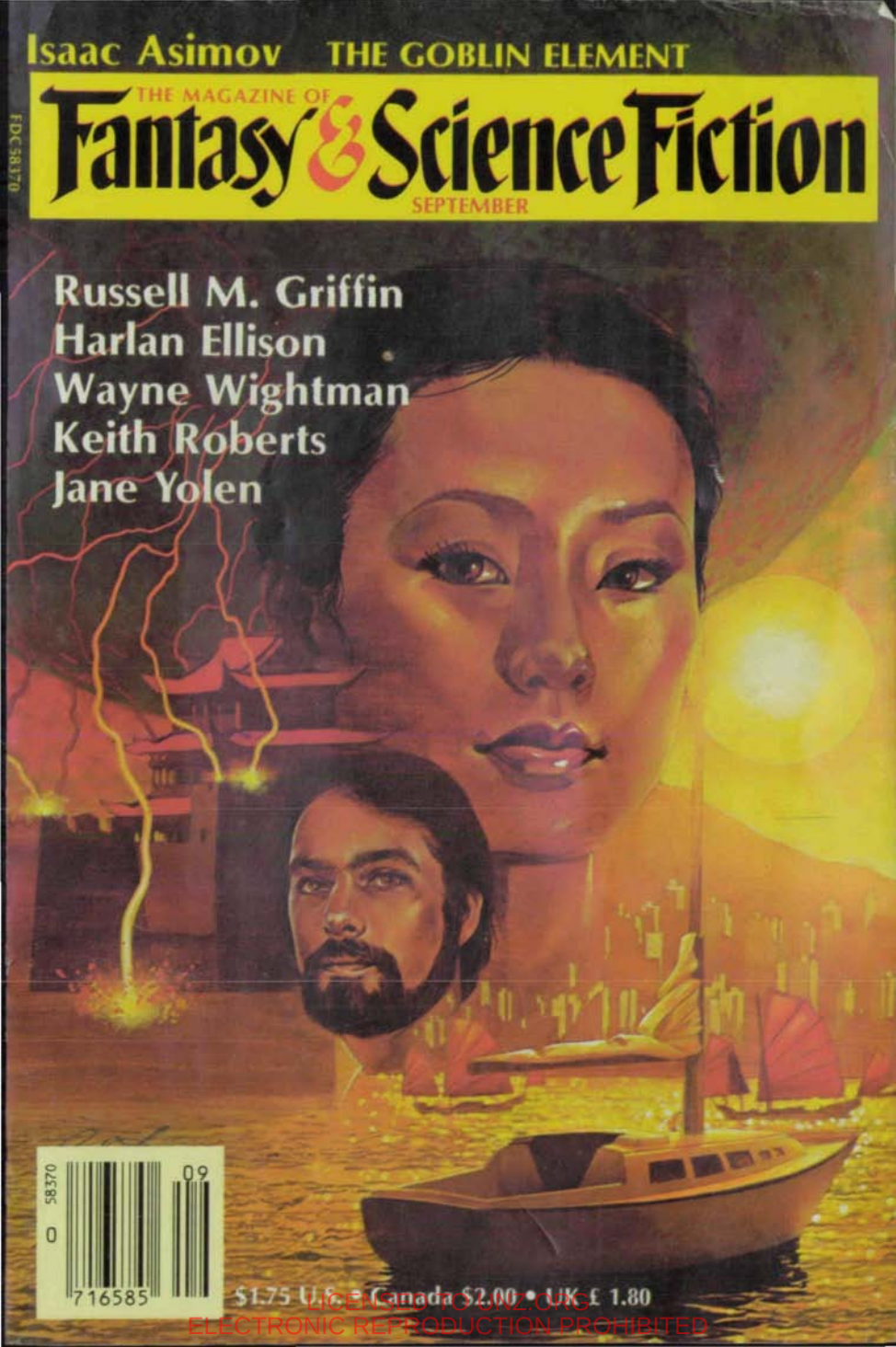
Isaac Asimov THE GOBLIN ELEMENT

FDC5870

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

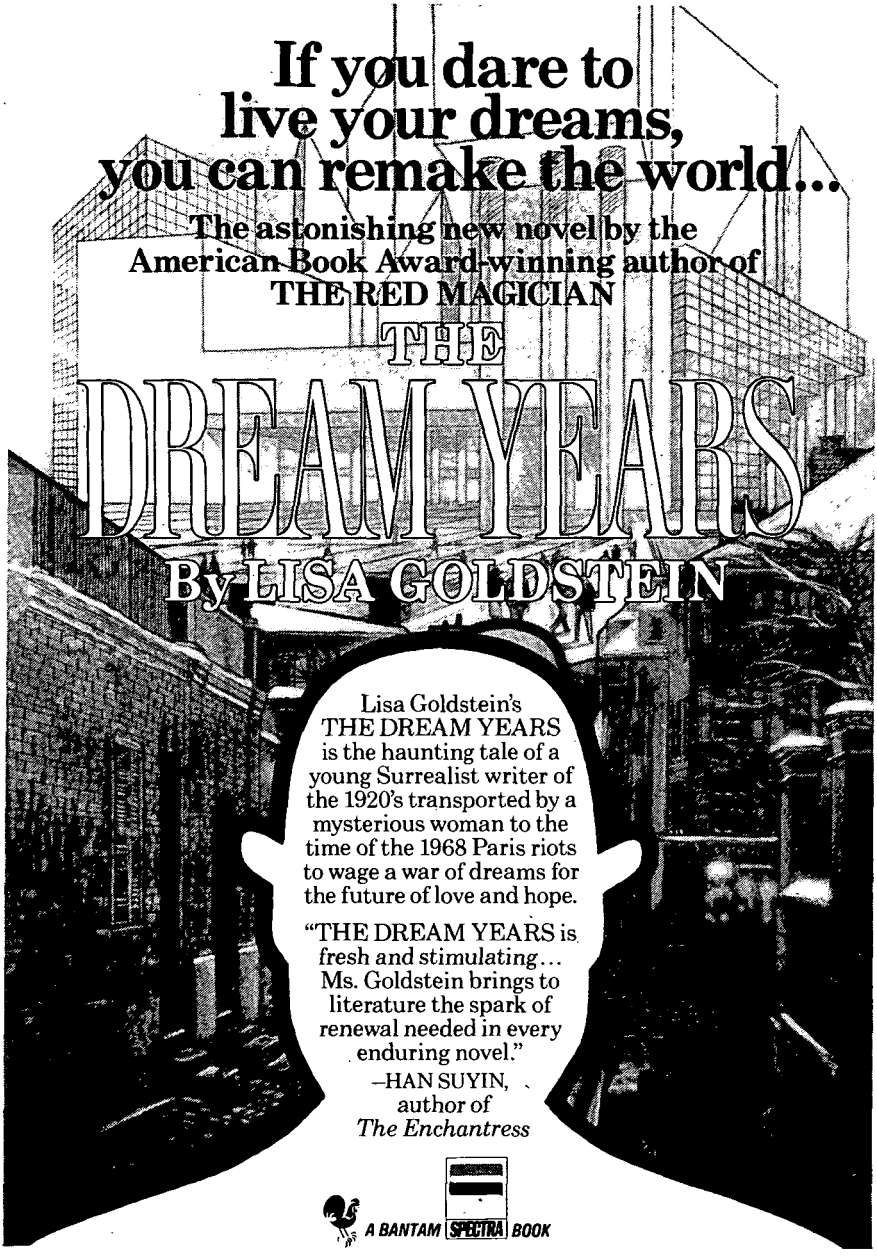
Russell M. Griffin
Harlan Ellison
Wayne Wightman
Keith Roberts
Jane Yolen



0 58370 09 716585

$1.75 U.S. • Canada $2.00 • U.K. £ 1.80

LICENSED TO GOOGLE.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED


If you dare to live your dreams, you can remake the world...
The astonishing new novel by the American Book Award-winning author of THE RED MAGICIAN
THE DREAM YEARS
By LISA GOLDSTEIN
Lisa Goldstein's THE DREAM YEARS is the haunting tale of a young Surrealist writer of the 1920's transported by a mysterious woman to the time of the 1968 Paris riots to wage a war of dreams for the future of love and hope.
"THE DREAM YEARS is fresh and stimulating... Ms. Goldstein brings to literature the spark of renewal needed in every enduring novel."
—HAN SUYIN, author of The Enchantress
A BANTAM SPECTRA BOOK

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The climactic novel of The Duel of Sorcery

CHANGER'S MOON

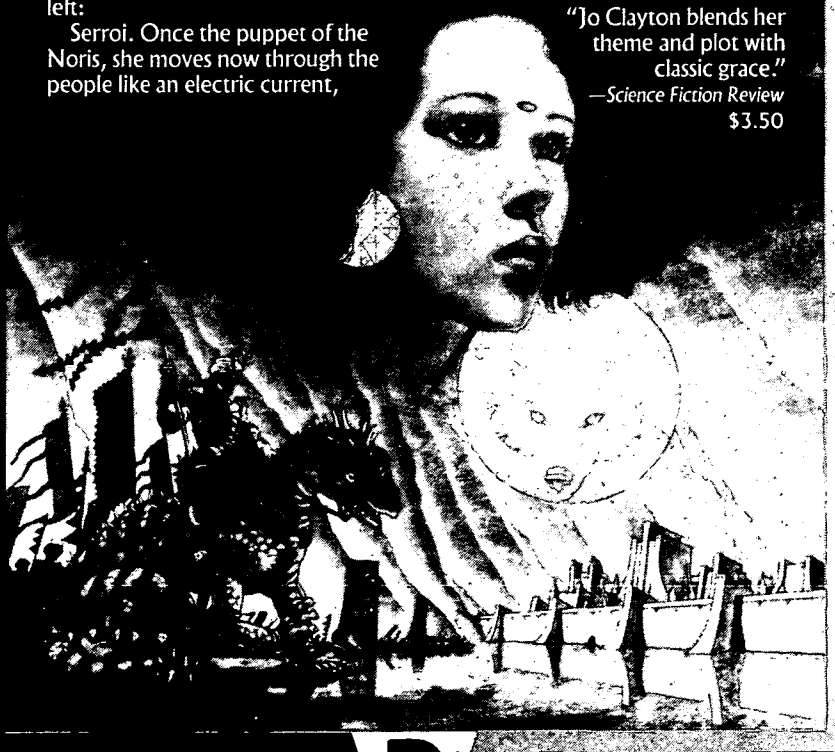
By JO CLAYTON

The final contest is at hand. And the two masters of magic and super-science now contend for total conquest. The Noris, with his armies, and the Indweller, who has only one chance left:

Serroi. Once the puppet of the Noris, she moves now through the people like an electric current, serving no master but the Changer—the Coyote, who could alter all the rules ...and make the incredible believable, the impossible a matter of immediate concern.

"Jo Clayton blends her theme and plot with classic grace."
—*Science Fiction Review*

$3.50



The Exclusive Science Fiction and Fantasy Line Selected by DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

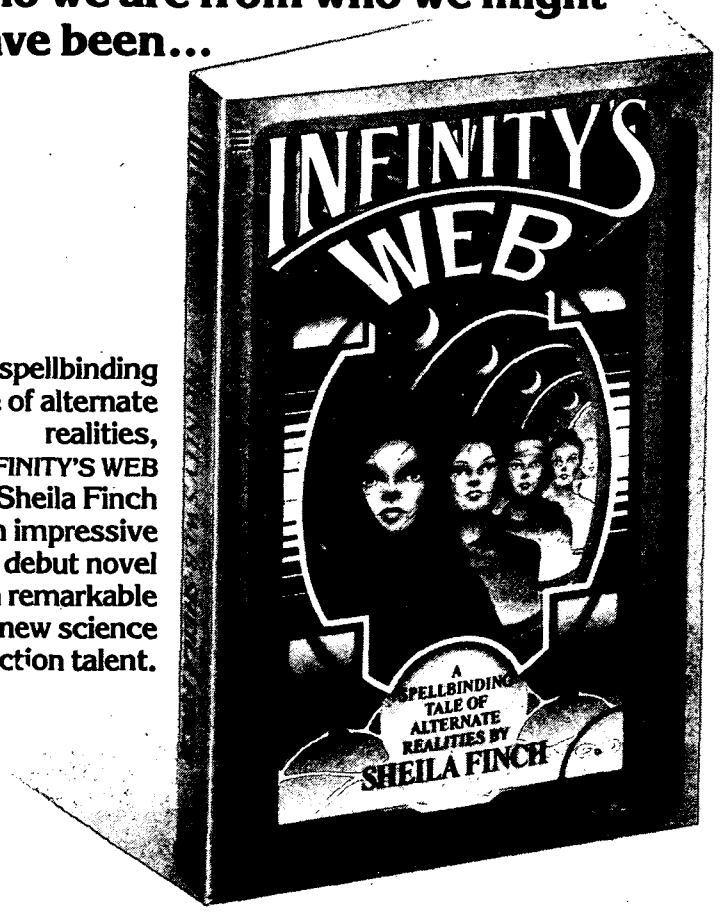
DAW FANTASY

Distributed by NAL
NEW AMERICAN LIBRARY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Each life is the result of an infinity of choices—choices that separate who we are from who we might have been...

A spellbinding tale of alternate realities, INFINITY'S WEB by Sheila Finch is an impressive debut novel by a remarkable new science fiction talent.

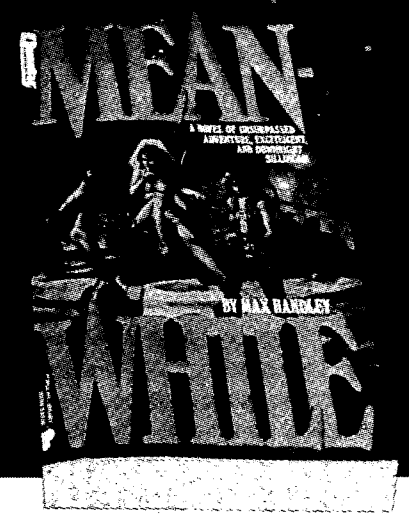


A BANTAM SPECTRA BOOK

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Questar

Science Fiction/Science Fantasy



DOOMSTALKER
Glen Cook

A stunning saga of war on a distant planet, where dark psychic powers are wielded in deadly combat.

Young Marika is the sole survivor of the ruthless slaughter of her tribe by the cannibalistic Grauken. She is taken in by the fearsome witch-women of Silth, who recognize the raw psi power Marika possesses. The Silth can apply their psychic skills to slay by the mind alone—and they train Marika to harness her enormous, untamed power. Soon she surpasses her teachers in her ability to fuel the Darkships... and control others.

0-445-20062-6/$2.95
(In Canada: 0-445-20063-4/$3.75)

MEANWHILE
Max Handley

A brilliant novel of delightful lunacy about the ultimate war between men and women.

A cataclysmic war has driven all men into submarine societies. On the planet's surface, the dominant women replenish their numbers by virgin birth. Each sex eventually forgets about the existence of the other... until one intrepid male wanders above water in search of a myth, a faded racial memory. Brother Two has never met a woman, but he is determined to be the first human male to mate in a thousand years!

0-445-20068-5/$3.50

AT BOOKSTORES EVERYWHERE

POPULAR LIBRARY

A Warner Communications Company

© 1985 Popular Library

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction

Including VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

SEPTEMBER • 36th Year of Publication

NOVELETS

NO LIFE FOR ME WITHOUT YOU, VODYANOI	32	Stephen Gallagher
THE DRAGON'S BOY	91	Jane Yolen
RICHENDA	137	Keith Roberts

SHORT STORIES

IN HECTOR'S GRAVE	8	Russell M. Griffin
THE GREAT WALL	54	Wayne Wightman
THE ARMISTEAD HOUSE	70	W. S. Doxey
LITTLE FRIENDS	107	Richard Mueller
PAIN KILLER	116	Haskell Barkin

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS	24	Algis Budrys
HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING	87	Harlan Ellison
SCIENCE: The Goblin Element	126	Isaac Asimov

CARTOONS: NURIT KARLIN (53); SIDNEY HARRIS (86); H. MARTIN (90)

COVER BY PAMELA LEE FOR "THE GREAT WALL"

EDWARD L. FERMAN, Editor & Publisher — ISAAC ASIMOV, Science Columnist
DALE FARRELL, Circulation Manager — AUDREY FERMAN, Business Manager
ALGIS BUDRYS, Book Review Editor — ANNE JORDAN, Associate Editor
Assistant Editors: MARGARET COOLEY, DAVID MICHAEL BUSKUS

The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 69, No. 3, Whole No. 412, Sept. 1985. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $1.75 per copy. Annual subscription $17.50; $20.50 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 20%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.

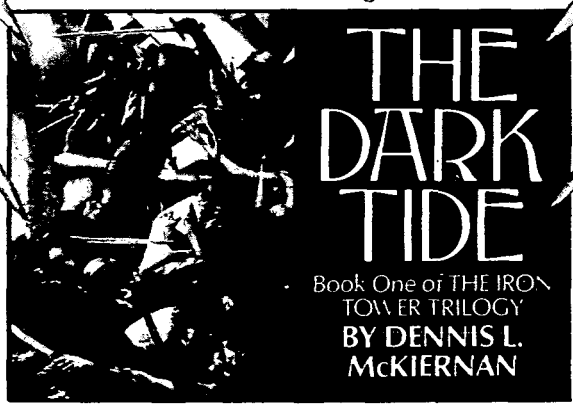
Copyright © 1985 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When legends wake and shadowlight cloaks the land, will the master of evil return to rule?

Long ages the Dark Lord slumbered.
But now he stirs again, his Power building to new heights, dimming the very sun, waking legends to walk the land. The time of reckoning is at hand.

Then Galen, High-King of Mithgar, sounds a desperate call. And Tuck and his fellow Warrows—small but doughty fighters with the gift of Sight—join with the ever-growing army of dwarves, elves, and human warriors to stem this deadly tide of destruction.
The final conflict has begun ...



THE DARK TIDE

Book One of THE IRON TOWER TRILOGY
BY DENNIS L. McKIERNAN

And look for SHADOWS OF DOOM and THE DARKEST DAY, Books Two and Three of the *Iron Tower Trilogy*, available September and October from Signet Fantasy.

$2.95

SIGNET FANTASY

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Russell Griffin has contributed poetry to F&SF and is the author of several SF novels, most recently TIMESERVERS (Avon). His first story here is an inventive tale about a future poet and his mad journey on a glacier.

In Hector's Grave

BY

RUSSELL M. GRIFFIN

My Father was a Scientist, & I am a Poet.

This must be understood if my Narrative is to make any Sense.

He was also Dean Prior of St. Shelby Firs-Edge. Ah, you think, that explains everything — it's always the vicar's son. It explains nothing. He was no better Man of God than Man of Science. A Wolf in shepherd's clothing.

But I digress.

Like so many with undemanding parishes & little to do else, my father, tiring of the Bible and even sainted Penguin Homer, came to fancy Science the only fit Pursuit for so learned a Divine. One thinks of the other Holy Meddlers our day has spawned, the idle curate who claims to have duplicated the Ancients' discovery of the Element in air that causes Combustion, the Reverend noodle who shames his gray head by declaring he has found stone Shellfish on a mountain he asserts was once the bottom of a lake! One might as well dream the Cataclysm undone & Earth whole again.

My father's peculiar Lunacy was to think antique collecting made him a Scholar of History, and poking about with a Spade like a sexton gone Mad was a Science that made the Past a Cadaver to be dissected, like a Frog's or a hanged Felon's, for the Common Profit. As Your Worship would doubtless agree, the past lives again only through the Poet's Imagination.

But I overleap myself. My chief weakness has always been rapidity of Thought.

It was April I returned home, warm & misty as spring is for us where the grasslands meet the fir & spruce forests two days south of the Ice, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

first April since he banish'd me.

It had always been his Fantasy that because my late Mother protected me from his Storms of Passion, I did not bear him proper filial Affection & Duty. After her death he provoked me & provoked me until, unable to goad me into an indiscretion, he concocted one & ordered me out for it.

With my skill in verse and natural Wit — though I do not claim to be another Penguin — I prospered well enough in New Ilium, a place far more congenial to the Gentleman's life than a rude vicarage in the icy north. Yet, like any good Son, I long'd to honor my Mother's memory through cordiality to her Husband. Thus it was Natural Piety alone (after an incident in Town I need not dwell on here) that drew me to the long road home.

It was after nightfall when I rapped at the parsonage gate, like Odysseus back in Ithaca, except no aged hound wagged its faithful tail in greeting. Only my father, a fat, foolish old man in shirtsleeves & parson's collar, peering out through the shutters. Yet he did not order me away. Indeed, I might almost have said his Aspect was more cheerful than I had ever seen.

Little did I know he had been waiting like the patient Spider in his Web.

We supped at either end of the long table, distant as candlesticks in a Miser's house, the only Sound the infernal clicking of the old man's jaw at his Skull whenever he chew'd (which, observe, I endured in patient Silence), and afterward retired to a low fire in the parlor grate for sherry & pipes. It was a Courtesy he seldom showed even before Mother's passing.

"And how goes it with you in Town, sir?" he began, hands on his fat thighs, looking like nothing so much as a Sack of Grain set in a chair.

"Well enough, sir," I replied.

"And the Allowance I send?"

It was so Niggardly I had not thought to mention it to you before. "I do not complain." You see how fair I answered him.

"Yet it's hard to imagine how a young man of your Tastes can survive on so modest a Sum in New Ilium. Perhaps your Poetry prospers?"

"I was commissioned a Month past for a Masque on the occasion of My Lord of Williamsport's birthday."

"Indeed?" He poured more sherry, a more southerly Vintage than his custom, a Sanibel with a richer, nuttier sweetness. "I do not pretend to understand such things, but I thought it was Old Theobald penned the Birthday Masque that so pleased His Lordship."

"A damnable lie!"

He raised his eyebrows. "We are not entirely benighted here, my boy. The newspapers come late, but they come."

"I had a disagreement with His Lordship's spoilt Pup of a son, a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

would-be Homer who envies my Gifts."

The old man's eyes narrow'd like a serpent's. "So you've come for more of your Patrimony?" I tried to protest, but he held up a plump hand. "There are Actors enough upon the Professional Stage — spare me fabrications. You are in desperate straits, are you not?"

"No."

"Oh? You've paid your Debts since my friends inquired into your finances?"

The blood rush'd to my face. A more intemperate man than I might have brained him where he stood. "They lie."

"Oh?" he asked again, crossing to open the thick lower door of an ancient Press Cupboard, an exquisite antique with an oldscript "Frigidaire" cunningly embossed along the handle, a relic he'd dug up or, more like, squandered more of my inheritance on. "Do these lie?" He drew a fistful of papers from one of the artfully wrought wire shelves inside.

"What are they?"

"Your notes for thousands in gaming debts: Don't bother to deny them — I bought them up myself, every penny's worth."

My glass fell to the floor with a bright *smash* that came to my ears distant & unreal, as though from another world. He brought me another from the Sideboard & fill'd it at my Chair.

"And what do you propose to do?" I manag'd.

He smil'd & was silent several moments, his flaccid Cheeks swelling like a bellows as he drew on his pipe. "You are familiar with Penguin Homer?" One never knew which Way he would spring. He had the wit of a Grasshopper.

"The one great Work to survive the Cataclysm? The Father of all Poetry, the Foundation on which Art was rebuilt?"

"Then you've read the *Iliad*?"

"'Sing, Muse, of the wrath of Peleus' son, Achilles, and the devastation it wrought,'" I recited. "What Gentleman with even a Pretense to Learning has not got it by heart, let alone a Poet?"

"Yes, yes," he said. "It's just that one can't be sure from what you write." You see how he studied to Provoke me? "How long ago do you think he liv'd?" he continued.

"Homer?" I asked.

"Achilles."

"Achilles and Troy are poetic fictions, the purest creations of the world's greatest Artist. They live throughout time, not in it."

"What if I told you that Achilles and windy Ilium did exist?" He closed his eyes in a transport of rapture. "That there really stood a Scaean Gate, the Great Tower, the sixty-two rooms of Priam's splendid palace, the holy Pergamus where the temple of Apollo—"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You would make Homer no true Poet, but a mere reporter?" I gasped.

"You wouldn't welcome a Confirmation of his Accuracy?"

"His greatness is not accuracy, but Art!"

He shook his head & returned to the Press Cupboard. From the top compartment he drew out a long Cylinder wrapped in oilskin. "Do you recognize this?" He slipped the wrapping down & unroll'd the scroll on the table. The firelight leapt across its shadows and flung his evil shape upon the wall behind.

"A Map of the Ancients, by the look of it." Again I could not but see my patrimony dwindling. I would inherit a House full of moths & dust, moths & dust. "Priceless, no doubt."

"But not as a curiosity," he said. "What name do you read there?"

"It is in oldscript," I said.

"You can't read it, then?"

My ears burned. "Of course I can. 'Ith ... Ithaca.'"

"Home of Odysseus," he smil'd. "And here?"

My face flush'd deeper. "The light is bad and the letters faded."

"It says 'Troy'"

"The map is fill'd with names," I protested. "'Athens,' 'Corinth,' 'Rome'—"

"All cities after Penguin Homer's time, in case you were about to object they aren't in the *Iliad*." I could see the outline of Satan's horns in the curl of his thin old smile. "They are ancient cities nonetheless. But it is Troy that interests me."

I licked my dry lips. "Where is this place supposed to be?"

"North."

"There's nothing up there but Ice."

The old man seated himself. "It has for many years been a Theory of mine that the Ice is a skin, a scab that has grown over land and farms and even cities since the Ancients' Cataclysm. Still, I had despaired of ever finding Proof until I heard a most remarkable tale."

"From some other dotty Vicar?"

"From one who should know. A Trapper."

"So now you listen to wildermen off the Ice?" I laughed. "Coarse buffoons and braggarts? You want a little in Discretion for your years."

"This Trapper described to me a windy cavern near a hummock or tor where two springs come up through the Ice — one cold, freezing into wild phantasms and strange shapes; and one hot, exhaling a dense, perpetual fog."

"And?"

"'And they came to two fair-flowing springs,'" he recited, head back in his best Declamation style, "'where fountains rise to feed deep-eddying Skamandros. From one flows warm water, and smoke swirls up there as it were from a blazing fire, while from the other even in summer flows water like cold hail or snow or ice.'" He paused a moment. "Do you recognize it?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Of course — Penguin Homer's description of the road from Mount Ida."

"To the Dardanian Gate, where bronze-helmeted Hector sought in vain for refuge from swift-footed Achilles. The gate through which Priam went to reclaim Hector's battered and dusty body from behind Achilles' chariot."

"What of it?"

"It matches perfectly the place described by the Iceman — the place you see on this map." He leaned back & stared at me across his tented Fingertips. "This place is Penguin Homer's Troy, and I intend to find it. With your help."

"Risk my life on the strength of an Iceman's lie? Never."

He looked hurt. "I am an old man. I cannot go alone."

"Hire someone," I said.

"You are my son."

"No Gentleman would ever venture onto the Ice," I said.

"A sporting fellow like you miss a chance to confirm my folly?"

"This isn't sport, it's suicide."

He frowned. "These notes are payable on Demand."

"You know I am without funds—"

"Then choose between a ruined reputation and Debtors' Prison, or a journey with me. If you won't pay me the debt of filial Duty, then you must pay these instead. If you won't be my Son, then by God you'll be my bondsman."

What choice had I? The very next morning, without so much as a day's Grace to recover from my long ride, I was again a-horseback, leaving the grassland tatters of Civilization for the gloom of the Great Forest's dripping fir & eternal Rain, in the gloomier Company of five asses. Four laden with the provisions brought out from cunning concealment, & the fifth in my father's Saddle, with my father shrilling on a Pipe of reeds like a scalded cat, & fancying he imitated Penguin Homer.

Oh, if ever I had not loathed him before, had I Cause to loathe him now, broad Brim of his rusty Vicar's hat cocked on the back of his head like a black Halo, his foolish short legs poking out like thick towel pegs over his Mount's rake-tooth sides.

He rode an eternity — all day — and made me spend a sleepless night in the Wet — which at least so softened his pipes he could no longer torture the least squeal from them — and next noon we had reached the endless Fogs roll'd like plump gentlemen off the Ice by the damp Winds. I clung to my Saddle, wrenched & jerked by the stumbling of my addlebrained Horse (I swear the old man gave me the worse mount apurpose), & tormented by a Devil's spawn of stinging flies & the fear wild Icemen might leap out from the next tree; yet I held my tongue until the gray sky had darkened.

"Pray, sir," at last said I meekly,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Your Health is sure to suffer with another night in the rain, and your safety is endangered by lurking wildermen everywhere. Why not stop and rest at that light twinkling through the trees? It might be a cottage."

"Probably an Iceman home," he said, eyes bright with some secret mirth. "Rough people they are. Some still point their arrows with flint."

I shuddered. "But surely your Collar will secure us a night's safe shelter."

The light prov'd a tumbledown wattle cottage with a muddy frontyard pigsty enclosed by a low fence of fardels. One pig stopped & stared at me with greedy little eyes, as though to ask how such a Gentleman had strayed so far from his proper Society, as though a Comet had fallen to Earth.

"A friend of yours?" my father asked, but before I could reply, an old woman dirtier than the swine poked her head out the door.

"Oh, it's you, Vicar!" she said. "Come in, come in. You know where to put up your horses."

The old liar had been here before! Next instant he had propell'd me into the yard, where I sank ankle-deep into something so Distasteful it took near an hour to scrape my boots on the stolen tombstone the woman used for a threshold. "An honest man is the noblest work of God," it read in oldscript.

The cottage was as decrepit inside as out, the food was worse — black soup of coarse-ground beans, turnip so undercooked I knew not where turnip ended & wood bowl began, a loaf of bread so hard I might have worn it for a Shoe. All the while the old widow nattered about the feeding habits and diseases of her herd of swine.

"Do you comprehend the significance, Boy?" my father said, jaw clicking with the last of his turnip.

My ears burned at his insufferable habit of using me as principal illustration in his lifelong Sermon. Wherever he went he carried the air of the Library with him. "Might not this woman be Circe's own descendant?" he continued. "The original was likely just such a swine-maid, perhaps rumored to traffick in magic, exaggerated into sorcery with each retelling until Penguin Homer wrote it down. Have your neighbors ever accused you of witchcraft, Mother?"

"Circe the Enchantress a misremembered Peasant?" I asked, rising with a flush'd face. "Is there nothing you would not sully?"

"Gentles, gentles," the old woman said. "We have business to discuss."

"My pardon," I said to the woman. "You saw how I was provoked."

"The iceboat you asked to hire is all I got left of my old man," she said to my father. "He built it to track wolf and wildersteer out onto the ice before he was lost. I need to know

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where you'll be wanting to take her."

My father considered warily. "To a place of fogs, where a cold spring and a hot bubble up together through the ice," he said at last.

The old woman started. "Near where he was lost — five hundred miles across the ice. It's a wild and windy place, not for warmfeet like you."

"At Seminary I sail'd every day on the ocean," my father said. "But if it's losing your property you fear, then I will buy it from you, and you may pay me back when we return."

So more of my patrimony collapsed like sand through an hourglass, but he bought the boat. And next morning, stiff & sore from the old woman's wet floor, I follow'd along the rubble of the cliffs & up a secret valley to where a Boat was tethered to a small fir at the edge of the Ice. I know now it was a typical Iceman rig, a rough platform pegged onto three log runners, with an enclosed bunker at the front — I mean "bow" — for provisions, and a single mast with a square mainsail and triangular jib.

"The Ice looks like a river here," my father said.

"I've seen houses twisted and carried a half mile and more over the years," the old woman said.

He looked delighted. "You see, Boy, it is not just frozen water, it *flows* like water too!"

"Solid Ice cannot move."

"Plants and trees are solid, yet flowers open, ivy climbs, trees grow — but too slow to be perceiv'd by our eyes, like the Ice. It confirms my theory of how the topless towers of Ilium came to be covered over."

You see how insufferable he was. But why add how, arguing infirmity of Age, he & the old crone browbeat me into staggering up and down the cliff like a beast of burden with the hogshead of potatoes, a flitch of bacon & bag of cornmeal, along with a greasy bladder of fresh vegetables bought of the swine-woman, & firewood, for nothing that might burn grows on the Ice. Suffice to say I could barely haul myself aboard, the old man fresh as May at the lines, just as a great Gust hummed in the rigging, snapped the mainsail like a washerwoman flapping her apron, and bellied it out. The boat creaked and trembl'd.

"Like being at Seminary again!" my father cried, his arm around the Tiller. "Cast off!"

The old woman complied, & the boat began to slip away, slowly at first, then faster & faster, the runners' hollow drumming through the washboard surface answered by the Ice's groans and echoing cracks. I clung for dear life to the deck as the wind shrieked past.

"Pull your hat down!" he shouted. "Your ears will freeze!"

The old woman & the Ice's edge dwindl'd & at last vanish'd over the horizon, and the frozen wasteland

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

still shot past on either side, sometimes table-flat, sometimes whipp'd into whorls & shapes Fantastical. Noon came & went, the only sign of life a great Eagle circling far above us, looking vainly for a meal & reminding me how I had been denied Sustenance all morning. I found a promising Tomato in the bladder of vegetables. It looked edible enough, but when I bit into it, I near lost my Teeth. The outside was frozen rock-hard!

I flung the wretched Thing from me. The red globe rose, arced away, & splattered on the ice astern, red pulp & seeds starring in every direction like the blood & brains of a shattered skull. I looked back at my father's head, tipped to the eyepiece of his Sextant.

He finally stopped at Dusk, & I made a sort of tent of shaggy wilder-steer skin against the boat's side. After the old man had struck a Fire at the first of our Precious logs to thaw some vegetables, he laid his hand on my arm. "I hope you will forgive my manner when I warned you about your Ears," he said. "You saw what the wind did to that tomato."

"Small comfort to a hungry man," I answered.

"Why do you persist in fighting me?" he demanded. "Do you still not understand why I bought up your notes?"

"To torment me."

"Is saving you from creditors tormenting you? No, it was to have you with me." He began to unroll the map to check it against his sextant sightings of the day. "To share with you the glory of my Discovery."

The wind howl'd anew outside like the wild fear in my heart. Had I been wrong about him? It claw'd its way around the laced flap & shook the sides of the Tent. No, he was just trying to deceive me. I looked angrily at the welter of strange names strewn across the map, flickering madly in the flame of the seal-oil lamp. Then I smil'd.

"Where is the water?" I said.

"Clearly that's the river Skamandros, though the map calls it—"

"No, the wine-dark sea. Penguin Homer tells us the Greek heroes travel'd back and forth several times a day from Troy to their *ships*. I see no ocean near this Troy of yours. And what of Odysseus' *island* home? Do you maintain Odysseus begg'd a black ship of Nausicaä and the Phaeacians if Ithaca were this town on a *lake* he could have *walked* around?"

"Like most self-proclaimed poets, you are ignorant of History," he flush'd. "Thousands of years elapsed between the days of the *Illiad* and the Ancients' Cataclysm, time enough for Homer's inland sea to dry up or be drained off through some crack in the Earth's crust—"

"Hah!"

"You are familiar with the Reverend Mr. Hilton?" asked Grasshop-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

per-wit again. "He has found embedded in the rocks of Stone Mountain what are clearly the petrified Bones of a long-dead Fish!"

"*That* crackpot?"

"Then consider that Penguin Homer might have called land cities 'islands' to heighten the Effect, or he might have described a journey by road as a voyage on the ocean to make the Struggle seem the greater and more vast. Poetic license, don't you call it?"

"I choose to think Penguin Homer said precisely what he conjured in his mind, a sea voyage."

My father roll'd the map back into its wrappings. "You have always fought me," he said, so softly I could scarce hear. "Your mother spoilt you and kept us apart. She left me with no Son and, with her now gone, you with no Parent. I admit I am old, I admit even in some ways I may be Foolish. But I ask you to forgive me and come back to me."

The wind howl'd louder outside.

"How many more days before you have had enough and we may put an end to this madness?" I asked coldly.

"Nine." He rammed the map into his pack. Outside I glimpsed for the first time the play of those ghostly lights that travelers report in the northern sky flickering green and white.

The days that follow'd grew worse & worse. I tried to count the hours by how the wasteland shifted from blue in the early morning to blinding white at noon to a green as twilight came on, or how on cloudy days it might go from gray to brown when the sudden hard storms reached down from the north. But numbness & fatigue so stole over me that I lost track. Then one morning I saw a stretch where the wind had gouged the coarse, sugary Snow into dollops of clotted cream, and our craft began to rock and skip wildly across the bumps.

"See how the wind blows?" he cried over the burr of the metal-capped runners. "Do you recall how Homer describes Troy?"

"Well-walled? Broad-streeted? Lofty?"

"Windy!"

My heart sank. For the first time I feared we might find enough chance correspondences to fix this madness in his Brain rather than cure it. And then, worse luck, I discerned a miasma of fog hov'ring at the Horizon, & as we swept closer, a Tor of ice or rock began to poke up from the vapors.

"That's the Confluence of the Hot and Cold Springs!" he called. "We are on the Dardanian Road, and the rise beyond must be—"

Even as he spoke, a runner caught on a knob of ice & flipped one side of the boat into the Air. We teetered fearfully who knows how, time frozen, the old man suspended in his struggle with the lines & tiller. Sud-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

denly I was sailing through the air, our boat gone from under me.

I struck the ice on my side & spun away like a cartwheel, coming to rest against a drift. A whole Universe of stars spun through my head before I could shake them clear and see our boat on its side, its deflated sail stretched flat as skin across the rough ice. But no sign of my Reverend father. I pull'd myself up with great Pain & Difficulty. Then I heard the old fool's groans.

Despite my own hurt, observe, I went to him. It was no easy matter to find him in the fog, for he lay at the lip of its very source, a deep cavern under the Ice. I could just make him out in the blue shadow, his leg twisted hideously. All around him the mist swirl'd and eddied about the drips of the melting roof. Behind him was a frozen pool wreath'd with fantastical spires and columns of Ice, and farther back a second dim lagoon exhaling those thick and sulfurous vapors. The hot & cold springs of my father's report!

The thought of leaving him there lasted only a moment. Who would not have entertained it? I would have had to do nothing but withhold an act, and that place might have been his Grave, my Patrimony secured, his provocations still'd.

"Help me," he call'd.

I made a Splint of a spare runner from the boat, though I lacked the Art to set the bone.

"How is the Boat?" he asked.

"Sound enough to take us home tomorrow."

The Old Man push'd himself up onto his Elbow. "What are you talking about?"

"We must get you to a physician," I said. Am I stone that I should not have shared for a moment his despair at a dream destroyed? I felt almost ... sorry.

"At the very entrance to Troy? Down there could be helmets, shields — who knows what secret treasures? The wealth of the ancient world!"

"If this were truly Troy."

"Which we must establish without delay. Please, you must carry me so I can see if the outline of the city can be discerned anywhere."

Why repeat my arguments? In the end somehow my heart melted. There was such ... Poetry in his mad passion, one could not but admire it. So I knelt like a beast of burden and let him clamber on my back, his splinted leg sticking out to one side, Youth yoked to crushing Age. Then I rose and stumbl'd from the cave to trace a path for the Tor.

"The Tower of Ilium, where Andromache climbed with her son and nurse to bid farewell to Hector. And beneath us must lie the Scaean Gate where the Trojan elders chirped merrily as cicadas on a branch, admiring white-veil'd Helen when she left off her tapestry of Trojans and Achaeans."

I staggered on.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"And to this very spot an evil fate shackl'd Hector as his comrades fled inside the walls and Achilles strode toward him, death in his eyes. Hurry, hurry!"

And so he went, naming this outcrop of ice the Temple of Apollo, that drift of snow the home of Paris.

"Built by the best craftsmen," he babbl'd. "And that might cover the remains of Deiphobus' house where Helen dwelt after Paris fell, and where Odysseus and Menelaus recaptured her the night the Wooden Horse betrayed the city."

At last we had completed a rough Square and were approaching the misty cavern mouth again.

"Perhaps here the Trojan women wash'd their Clothes to shining cleanliness before grim-faced war came to the Troas," he panted. "Go on, again!"

I almost dropped him. "A second time around?"

"Recall how Achilles the brave runner pursu'd Hector, breaker of horses, three times about the city while Zeus mourned and the other gods looked on? If we can circle the city three times, then the identification will be past doubt. My weight will be to you like the armor Hector wore as he ran. Hurry, the second circuit!"

He was tireless. Who would not be with another to carry him? Yet I did it, observe, & staggered back to our camp well before the sun had set or the ghost lights had begun to flicker.

"This *is* Troy," he said. "To think beside the warmth of this spring, Zeus the Father weighed the death days of Hector and Achilles, and saw the Hector's sink. But enough rest, Boy — we must explore along this cavern that the warm stream has cut into the ice to — who knows? The City itself!"

"I cannot go another step," I panted.

"You need not carry me," he said kindly. "I can manage by leaning against the cavern wall, if you will get me another runner as a crutch. And bring the ax, and a torch."

By the boat I reliev'd myself, disgusted with my indecisiveness. The hot stream released more vapors to join the fog as it drill'd a yellow hole into the snow, yet I could kindle no delight in profaning the old man's dream. I had seen something — I know not what — in his face, & I felt in return what I had never known before except in the transports of the poetry of Penguin Homer.

It was cold, terribly cold, though melting ice dripped from the sides of the Grotto, & the sunlight shone filtered through the Ice walls a luminous & unearthly blue. The footing on the west ice beside the warm Stream was treacherous.

"It is all melting," the old man breath'd. "Perhaps not in my lifetime, Boy, perhaps not even in yours, but someday the damage of the Cataclysm will be undone and this Ice will be

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gone. The earth far beneath us will see sunlight again."

I told myself he would be as wrong about this as about everything. The Ice was forever. But my heart quailed as each Turning reveal'd not the solid wall I hoped but more cavern. On we went until the sunlight no longer shone through the Ice, & the walls were black except in the orange glow of our torch.

At last we reached a great Lake of black water where dark shadows rippled beneath our reflections. It reached from one wall to the other so that there was no way around on either side, & far enough across that it could not be jumped. I tested for depth with the ax on a rope.

"Neck-deep at least," I said. "Strange it doesn't freeze."

My father dipped his finger in and sniff'd it. "Because it's more Oil than Water," he said.

"Whatever it is, it's too far to jump and too cold to swim. We must turn back."

He leaned against the ice wall, older than he seemed when we set out. And again I felt the tug of Pity. The walls dripped, the torch guttered like the rumbling belly of some huge, frozen monster.

"It is down there, I *feel* it! The temple where Hecuba laid costly robes on the knees of Athena to turn back the raging Diomedes—"

Suddenly he saw something at my Feet. "What is that?" he demanded, pointing at a rusted piece of Metal that protruded from the Ice at the edge of the Oil. "Quick, your ax!"

I set at it with little heart. I confess I was less than Nice whether I struck Ice or Metal, but at length I cut enough away to free it. It seemed some kind of rusted serving bowl.

"A trapper's dish, left here perhaps a hundred years ago," I said, handing it to him.

I saw his Satan's smile return. "A trapper with a *metal* dish? A dish that was even silvered — don't you see the flecks still clinging amidst the rust? And would an illiterate trapper — you yourself told me what coarse buffoons they are — have something in oldscript embossed on it?"

I took the thing back and ran my glov'd fingers over the design in the hollow of the bowl. "It isn't writing — it's a picture, a crude bird."

He drew a scrap of paper from his wallet and laying it over the design, took a stick of charcoal from the same place and rubbed across it. "You see — an oldscript *W* surmounted by a *v*," he said.

"And what would that make it?" I asked.

"The owner's initials as a crest," he exulted. "This must be a shield or buckler!"

I began to lose Patience. "But there is no place to attach arm straps," I said.

He wasn't even listening. "See what your chopping has uncovered!" Now

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he was pointing to the pool's edge where a bit of stone facing showed. "This is the grave of some great warrior!"

It was of that fine composite the Ancients often used; I began to fear it might indeed be the lip of a huge Crypt.

"Think of the funerary Gifts that lie down there preserv'd by this chance accumulation of Oil! Use your ax as a grappling hook, boy. See what you can dredge up!"

There was no help for it but to obey. Again and again I cast my ax on its rope into the pool and pull'd it in. And then it caught on something! I strained & tugg'd until at last a strange flat shape emerg'd.

It prov'd a triangular piece of metal less than two feet from its base to its longest point. Over it was folded a rectangular piece nearly a foot high & three feet long, jagged at one end as though broken off.

"Another shield!" he cried, separating the triangle and holding it point down. "This time there is no mistaking where the straps were." He pointed to two quarter-inch holes, one near the longer point, the other equidistant between the two other points. There was some kind of design engraved into the surface.

"Agamemnon's shield?" I scoff'd.

"Homer tells us Agamemnon's shield had a buckler strap decorated with a three-headed Snake, and anyone knows Agamemnon lies not here but in golden Mycenae, where his cruel wife struck him down."

"What makes you so sure this is a shield at all?"

"Beyond the shape and the strap holes, there is the Writing," he said, wiping the oil from it. "See for yourself."

I reached out and traced the slippery indentations, my fingers cold inside my gloves. "It says nothing, even in oldscript."

"You are reading it backward." He turned it over, barely able to breathe in his excitement, and wiped the black face. "Now what do you have to say?"

I felt the raised letters. "'YIELD'?" I read.

"What better motto for a great warrior to put on his shield to make the hearts of his enemies quail. Why, this might be the grave of great Hector himself!"

"But he was cremated! Achilles finally granted him his rite of burning, and the Trojans built a great pyre—"

"And gathered up his white bones into a golden urn when it was over," my father said. "And wrapped it in soft purple robes and buried it beneath a great pile of stones. Here!"

My face flush'd, my forehead burned, my eyes closed. What if we *bad* found Troy and great Hector's grave? What would happen if Art and Poesy became shackl'd to this drab & diminish'd reality?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Two more in the Alternatives series of Science Fiction criticism...

BENCHMARKS
Galaxy Bookshelf by Algis Budrys
With an evaluation by CATHERINE L. McCLENAHAN and an introduction by FREDERIK POHL. A collection of this leading science fiction critic's columns for the now-defunct *Galaxy Magazine*, these reviews are insightful, eclectic, and notoriously uninhibited. $19.95

SHADOWS OF THE MAGIC LAMP
Fantasy and Science Fiction in Film
Edited by GEORGE E. SLUSSER and ERIC S. RABKIN. From a wide range of perspectives, a group of scholars and critics explore the importance of science fiction and fantasy in contemporary film—from Méliès and Lang to recent films such as *E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. $19.95

Write for a complete list of Alternatives titles.

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PRESS
P.O. Box 3697, Carbondale, Illinois 62902-3697

"Wait a bit," I heard his voice exclaim. "No — this is not Hector's grave at all."

My eyes snapped open. He had flattened the rectangular piece of metal across his knees, his eyes two red stars of torchlight.

"I am glad you see Sense at last," I sigh'd.

"It is something I never dared hope for!"

"For one thing, it is too narrow to be a shield," I began.

"Of *course* it isn't a shield, ninny — it's a grave marker! And what do you make out the fourth word to be?"

"The last one? *A-U-T-H-O-R*—" I faltered.

"What one author would merit a tombstone of rare and precious metal?"

Fear gripped my heart. "Insanity!"

"And what author would deserve to be buried at the very gates of Troy?"

"But the end's broken off. There might have been more letters. It could have said 'authors,' and those other words preceding—"

"The grave of *Homer*!" he said, grabbing it back. "Somewhere in that Oil lies the great Poet himself!"

I cannot describe the Despair I felt. Penguin Homer defenseless against unhallow'd fingers, his very skull, the empty vessel of the world's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

foremost Poet, to be lugg'd back to crown a Curio collection? For all the warring in my breast of Love & Hate & filial Obligation, my Duty was clear.

I do not remember clearly what follow'd. I have a distant recollection of gripping the ax more tightly, a wisp of memory of the old man's face twisted in a grimace of astonishment and fear. And the most curious, you'll allow, how that tomato from the first day exploded when it struck the Ice.

I dredg'd every inch of the tomb, to be sure. There was no body there, though I doubt not he was right in some sense — perhaps a public cemetery, for my search uncovered another marker indicating it was an area of rest. Or it may have been Hector's grave. Or Father Priam's. So much the better and more fitting, for beside it I laid him with his secret, for I could not bear to cover him in that oily pit.

But of one thing I am certain, he does not sleep in Homer's grave. The word "AUTHOR-" was definitely broken off, though what "NEW YORK STATE THRUWAY AUTHOR-" (correctly "AUTHORS," I think) meant is, like the buckler, another secret the Trojans have taken to their graves.

So you see, sir, while it is true that I have fail'd somewhat in filial Love & Duty, I did not wish it. Some things must not be told, & reluctantly I acted in the service of a truth higher than that poor old man in the icy cave could ever understand, that indeed only a nobleman of your discretion might perceive. And hoping you might already be favorably disposed by reason of those Lines composed on your birthday (which were so maliciously omitted from the Masque itself), I have taken the liberty of entrusting my tale to you to secure Your Lordship's Advocacy *in advance,* thus circumventing & foiling the wretched swine-woman (a simpleminded harpy who will seek revenge for the wreck of her boat) and the other envious Curs conspiring to get for themselves the estate and valuable Collection that is mine by right. Especially as I am quite unable to defend myself, exhausted as I am by my heroic struggle back across the Ice to preserve this dread & dire Secret.

My future, Your Grace, lies in your hands.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This Publication is available in Microform.

Please send additional information for _____
(name of publication)

Name _____

Institution _____

Street _____

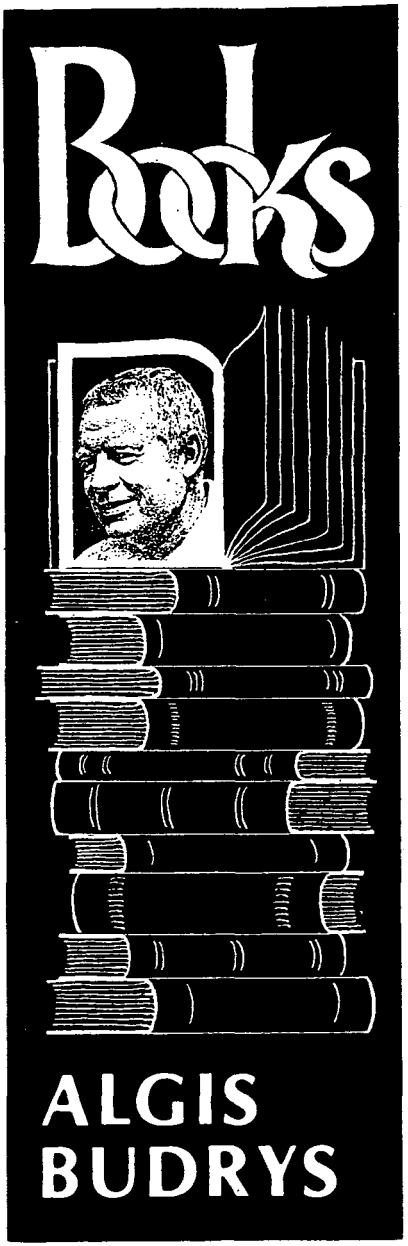
City _____

State _____ Zip _____

University Microfilms International

300 North Zeeb Road, Dept. P.R., Ann Arbor, Mi. 48106

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Bridge of Birds, Barry Hughart, Del Rey, $2.95

Blood Music, Greg Bear, Arbor House, $14.95

With considerable joy, I can tell you there are a couple of really fetching books here, by a couple of writers who display enormous promise.

Bridge of Birds is Barry Hughart's first novel, originally published by St. Martin's in 1984, now a Del Rey paperback at an accessible price and with rational distribution. Del Rey's estimate of this book is indicated by the care that has been given its production; the special cover stock, the extra touches with the text design, both within the parameters of mass-market paperback production economics, but just barely within them.

This is not going to be the sort of ephemeral blockbuster whose interior can be one long dull column of type plodding from front to back, but whose cover demands die-cutting and metallic embossing for fear that it might otherwise not be noticed at all, which book will pay back immediately if at all, and be forgotten. The much quieter and more ingenious attention paid to *Bridge of Birds* bespeaks a far different estimate. It represents a little something extra done where it did not strictly speaking need to be; that's as tangible as love and respect get in this milieu. *Bridge of Birds* will be around for a long time; it is good to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

see it so amenable to the eye.

It's a fantasy subtitled "A Novel of an Ancient China that Never Was," and there I would quibble. It's a novel set in an ancient China that I suppose never was, but it is a novel of universal things that clearly are: Greed, love, faith, honor, opportunism, *joie de vivre,* rascality, courage, and the many faces of honesty, to name some of them.

Hughart, if his back-page bio is any guide, is one of those writers who has knocked around the world; he certainly writes like someone with considerable experience of human nature. "His interest in the Far East began during military service. . .when he discovered that vast numbers of Chinese deities had really originated as characters in novels."

(What a multivalent explosion is contained there!)

This is not what his book is about. His book is couched in terms of the quest shared by the strong, sincere young man called Number Ten Ox, and the ancient master Li Kao with a slight flaw in his character. The children of Ox's village have been poisoned by the intricate greedy scheme of Pawnbroker Fang and the merchant called Ma the Grub, and only the Great Root of Power can revive them from their coma before they are lost forever. Finding the Great Root will consume the entire book.

In the best-plotted quest novels, not a word is wasted; every step leads into greater complications, every bland assertion of fact conceals some fresh pitfall, and the straightforward solutions are always disastrous. You may not have noticed that yet, because in our contemporary plethora of quest novels, you can go miles before encountering one that approaches this ideal. *Bridge of Birds* embodies it; Hughart may not have written much before this, but he has assuredly been thinking.

In the most attractive quest novels, however, it is advisable to show full-bodied characters moving swiftly and speaking charmingly through an eye-catching array of quasi-medieval scenery and furniture. This is what people think the story is about, and what creates the pictures in their minds, one hopes enduringly. It is a good idea to incorporate at least one raffish principal character, and to make the maidens ravishing, the rascals convincingly shrewd but terminally mistaken, and the central villain a truly monstrous figure. In addition, a thread of pure romance is always a good thing to weave into the fabric. Hughart knows this, too, and very rarely falters. This is an area in which intelligence and doing your homework will not quite substitute for experience, but even so *Bridge of Birds* is a wonderfully told story, packed with charming incident and spiced with laughter.

The "Chinese" setting — which I must judge almost entirely on the basis of the settings in fiction by Jack

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Finney, Stephen Becker and Richard McKenna, plus some travelogues — strikes me as marvelously facilitative. Where it has to be realistic, it can be about a real place that is not like our real place. Where it has to stretch credulity — as in introducing a gunpowder-powered bamboo helicopter of enormous range and carrying capacity — it can shift over into the milieu of brushstrokes on silk or pottery, so that although one cannot actually see the fire-cart bearing its three heroes safely away from monstrous peril, one can readily visualize the painting in which this scene is depicted.

Hughart takes full advantage of this metamorphic capability; one moment we are enmeshed in a tale of struggle and alarm on the nitty-gritty level, and the next we are delicately and deftly transported into a universe where myth becomes reality becomes myth. In the grip of this engaging will-o'-the wisp effect, it becomes unnecessary to even guess at how much of this is China and how much of it is not; it is the universe within the tale. And in that universe move characters we will long remember.

It's usually a groaner nowadays to be told that the author of some new book has not yet done with racking it into sufficient elongation and "a sequel is promised." In the case of *Bridge of Birds,* there will be more stories about Number Ten Ox and Li Kao. The latter does, indeed, have a slight flaw in his character, but Hughart — Oh, dear, I am about to coin a clever phrase — has none in his.

A book it will be very hard to sequelize is Greg Bear's *Blood Music*; it ends with the universe transformed out of all recognition. Tell you the truth, it ends in a way that's so hard to follow, you may wonder whether Bear has actually ended it or simply brought it to a halt. (I vote for the latter, but am open to dissent.) Nevertheless, because Bear is working in a remarkably facilitative milieu, it doesn't matter. We drift between "realism" and "fantasy" so fluently that one thinks back to his quasi-Oriental *Beyond Heaven's River*, although that was a book superficially not at all like this one.

This fantasy milieu is the contempory world of genetic technology. Bear has introduced some suppositional science, but essentially he has simply taken the known possibilities inherent in gene-splicing and extended them. What he has written may be read as horror novel by some; by dedicated SF readers, it will be read with fascination as we see the classic evolution of the story from its simple initial premise to its fully deployed panoply of eventual consequences. The reader follows along, guided by the author, examining clues, attempting to guess ahead, seeking the reward of having assimilated an intellectual proposition whose suc-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cessful grasping will yield emotional satisfaction. That's the object of the quest.

The initial premise is simple; a biologist with tunnel vision of the mind creates a virus that can reason, which would be bad enough, but which then goes on to be self-aware. Persistent, brave, and ingenious, it gradually takes control of its environment and begins modifying it for its own benefit, and for its own expanding sophistication in determining what its benefit is. Once it realizes there is more to Creation than the body of the god that made it, it ventures forth on an epic exploration and then transformation of the wide, wide universe. Result: the conversion of the biomass of the Western Hemisphere into a variety of ingenious protein structures, within which, encoded among all the other data it can store in its biochips, are the descriptions of all the old independent structures it broke down.

This latter feature means that Slow Susie, one of the few humans who is not dissolved into the structure of the new Manhattan, can be visited by her brothers and mother even though she saw them dissolve in Brooklyn, and these people can in fact be the people they say they are, although they would much rather merge back as soon as possible. It also means that those who dissolved can be recalled as concepts within the protein, and those concepts can "inhabit" "imaginery" concept-universes which are as real to them as ours is to us, and in which they can act with as much effectiveness as we can display.

It means more than that. Suppose the old metaphysical saw is true — that the nature of reality is determined by the weight of what people agree reality is. i.e., the democratic process rules Newton and Galileo, Einstein and Loewenhoek and Heisenberg. O.K. . . . suddenly reality is in the hands of a billion trillion newly enfranchised voters.

Putting it another way, if Clarke's Dictum is that any sufficiently advanced science is indistinguishable from magic, the Budrys Corollary as informed by Bear's Example is that any sufficiently extended science fiction premise yields effects indistinguishable from fantasy.*

That's not really a new idea; in fact, it's an old accusation. But I urge you to try it as applied by Bear; you might find some thing or two that's decidedly unfamiliar.

Bear's skill works on a number of levels. First, there is the narrative itself, which proceeds from strength to strength over chapter after chapter until you begin to wonder if the man is even capable of faltering, let alone whether he will. On the original short story, which competent authority — Ed Bryant — has described to me as

**ANY premise. Exceptions gratefully accepted c/o F&SF.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

essentially an exchange of dialogues, Bear has imposed the full story of poor bloody Vergil Ulam, who faked his credentials because he knew he could do the work, got a research job and exceeded its limits because he knew he could handle it, and in his lovably human, blundering way, destroyed the human race.

The story of gene-splicing gone wrong is at least as old as Watson and Crick, and the fear of it has sparked outbreaks of hysteria on every level of government from the village and farm on through the city of, for instance, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and on into demonstrations in Washington, D.C. It has divided the contempory scientific community more bitterly than any other single scientific topic, not excepting nuclear physical ones, and stimulated the salivary glands of many a would-be creator of best-selling novels, not excepting your humble servant at the time of the Cambridge brouhaha.

Oddly enough, the same general public that has kept the anti-nuke issue alive and persistently attempted to save the whales has, when all is said and done, treated the recombinant DNA issue with a big ho-hum. Nothing terrible has happened, and Genentech and other firms are proceeding against a background of expectation for a better type of insulin, a bountiful supply of growth hormones, and with copious interferon, perhaps even a cancer cure. Few have a good fix on how all this works or could work, but although there was a time when Cambridge alderpersons were haunted by a mental picture of bad bugs from Harvard climbing up at them out of the toilet bowl, there is this feeling that it's all blown over and it's all going well.*

What the merits of the matter may be, I don't really know. (For the record, I held and hold the intellectual conviction that we are always better off with research than without, but my opinion is meaningless though not blithe.) In any event, the operational result has been that no gene-splicing horror novel has ever quite taken the country by storm, though many have tried. I suppose Peter Straub's *Floating Dragon* came closest, though no one can say what real possibility his "thinking cloud" was intended to resemble.

So I do not think *Blood Music* will take the country by storm, although it is unmatched for verisimilitude as well as pacing in its scenes up to the breakout of the virus into the general population. This is exactly how it could be — who the "villain" will be, how his or her corporate employers will react every step of the way until it's too late — and how tragic it would be for us to discover, if we could discover, that

**I've even had pro-splicing researchers tip me a wink and allow as how recombinant organisms have gotton out numerous times from even the P-4 maximum containment/maximum danger labs, and nothing has happened, so what the hell.*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

our cataclast was in fact a rather likable person with many endearing and justified traits.

It also will not take the country by storm because although it begins with thriller-style writing, its science is totally incomprehensible — that is, within the limits of fiction, it is dead-accurate contemporary science. There is nothing that will shake your faith in even a good 1950s education like exposure to the sound of where we have gotten to in the 1980s; it's gibberish, on nearly every front of science, and yet as we recoil from their smokes and spells, we can see the wizards are clearly potent, for every day they sell us something even newer than before.

Bear rides this trend to a fare-theewell; he is as at home in this China as Hughart is in his, and at the same time that he deploys literary gifts fully the equal of anything we have seen since Gernsback's *Fiat Lux* fell upon us all, gifts superior to all but a very few — and most of them Bear's contemporaries or successors — at the same time he seems at least as familiar with his scientific premises as anyone could be. I have never agreed with C.P. Snow that there are two cultures, but the argument is moot now; Bear is among the best of those who have made it so. Or, the thought occurs, he is in the forefront of creating two cultures for the first time, because he is bound to be leaving some of us mere scientiphiles behind.

Well, anyway. What happens after the virus breaks out is that we leave the thriller behind and go to characters like Slow Susie, whom the dissolution has spared "because it would kill them." These people — all apparently dull-normals but not otherwise described — wander a North America undergoing transformation. At first, there are the brown sheets, covering everything, sometimes tearing off and sailing downwind before impacting on some structure they wrap afresh. Then there are the white forms, the forms like tumbleweeds, and soon the geometric forms, hard and soft. There is apparently an orgy of creativity; there is what seems to be competition . . . although one must remember that what appear to be the new organisms are in fact constructs of the actual organisms; kinds of dirigible and backhoe, of transcontinental train and escalator, perhaps of racing team and armored cavalry, of saboteurs and police, for there is nothing, nothing that the microscopic world cannot do, no grade of substance that it cannot form, under the direction of the virii. Soon the works of humankind are gone; the skyline of Manhattan has been eaten and digested, its bones re-made into structures of no doubt great use, and then, ultimately, these, too, are gone in a trice, superseded by a evolution that has carried the virii beyond any need for them.

What happens in this third of the book is a J.G. Ballard novel. We never

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

learn why there are "immune" humans at all; they are too few to be Down's Syndrome children, which is one possibility I flirted with; they are far too few to be any likely type at all. One of them is Vergil Ulam's mother, for no discernible reason except that she is described by various observers as a "witch," for no discernible reason except that she looks younger than her years, always wears silk, and knew something terrible would come of Vergil's deeds. We are given few substantial clues to the motives or internal struggles of the virii; we see only what the Slow Susies see, and if we did not strongly suspect that Bear could in fact account for every spike and ball of it, the resemblance to Ballardian nihilism would be uncanny.

Perhaps Bear was recapitulating some form of SF's evolution, for the final third of the book is in the new syntax he shares with the authors of novels like William Gibson's *Neuromancer* — the nearly comprehensible symbology of the datascapes, the just-out-of-reach phrasing of the DNA/biochip code, the lost language of the future.

I cannot quite read what he has done there, and for that reason I say the book tails off as a novel. I have additional, technical reasons; the detection of what seem obvious afterthoughts, the stumbling over what I take to be seams in a book assembled from pieces, the introduction and discard of red herrings and prehensile tails. I think Bear even on his own terms has not written a book beyond exception. But if he had — if *Blood Music* were even better than it is — I am not sure it would be any more comprehensible at this time. In due time, I am convinced, it will be. It is an as yet unaccountably important book; half really real, half painted real, wholly striking.

I draw my parallels to a close. Here are two books by two uncommon talents, the one a gentle paperback, the other a hardback jacketted and titled to proclaim the "weird," and yet they circle around toward each other in many ways.

What does this mean? At the very least, it means Hughart is born into our consciousness and Bear has attained maturity, somehow, for his mistakes are forgiven rather than used as the bases for lecturings, and now, to the best of his ability, he teaches us. It would be smart to listen, I think, to the best of our abilities; to sip Hughart while eating Bear, to look forward to what will be found next in the ancient future and the new past.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy and Science Fiction

EDWARD L. FERMAN, PUBLISHER, BOX 56, CORNWALL, CONNECTICUT 06753 / 203-672-6376

The following back issues of THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION are available at the prices indicated.

$2.50 each:

1985 - Jan Feb Mar Apr May June July August Sept Oct Nov Dec

1984 - Jan May July Aug Sept Dec

1983 - Jan Feb Mar Apr May June July Aug Sept Nov Dec

1982 - Jan Feb Mar Apr May June July Aug Sept Nov Dec

1981 - Jan Mar Apr May June July Aug Sept Dec

$3.00 each:

1980 - Jan Feb May June July Aug Sept Nov Dec

1979 - Feb Mar Apr May June July Sept Nov

1978 - Jan Mar May June Aug

1977 - Feb Mar Apr May June Aug Sept Nov Dec

1976 - Feb Apr May July Aug

SPECIAL COLLECTORS ISSUES:

Anniversary Issues: $3.50 each

October 84 - 35th

October 83 - 34th

October 82 - 33rd

Anniversary Issues: $5.00 each

October 81 - 32nd

October 80 - 31st

October 77 - 28th

STEPHEN KING STORY ISSUES: $5.00

1984 - June

1981 - Feb Nov 1980 - April

DAMON KNIGHT SPECIAL ISSUE: $5.00

ALL STAR-Mar 1980: $4.50

F&SF T-SHIRTS - $7.00 each. Two colors: Navy blue with the original F&SF logo imprinted in white; red with logo in navy blue.

SMALL___MEDIUM_____LARGE_____X-LARGE_____ NAVY___RED___

PLEASE CIRCLE the issues/T-shirts desired and fill out the coupon below. All orders must be prepaid. Connecticut residents please add 7½% sales tax. Canadian and foreign orders please add $1.50 postage. ALL CHECKS MUST BE PAYABLE IN US DOLLARS THROUGH A US BANK. Thank you.

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

CITY_____STATE_____ZIP_____

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Stephen Gallagher wrote "The Boy Who Talked to the Animals," (February 1985). His latest is a tale about a man who operates a courier service and a compelling and mysterious woman whom he meets on the highway.

No Life for Me Without You, Vodyanoi

BY
STEPHEN GALLAGHER

The Jag would fit into the cinder-block garage, but only just. It was a squeeze to get out on the driver's side, and he'd had to hang a couple of old carpet squares on the wall to keep the door from getting banged. Anytime he had to work on the car —which was often — he either had to borrow space or else wait until the weather was fine enough to run it onto the parking lot behind the flats.

"Garbage in disguise," Pete Irwin said aloud as he made the awkward slide, trying to hold onto the clipboard that carried his latest itinerary and all his mileage notes. There was nobody to hear him but the big Jaguar itself, and the car had little reason to be resentful; Irwin had, after all, rescued it from a certain trip to the crusher and then spent a year straightening and rebuilding to get it back to an appearance of top condition. He knew that he was running a car that was way out of his class; and the Jaguar, for its part, knew that it was running on borrowed time. They got along fine.

After taking his overnight bag out of the boot, he checked the back end for clearance and then reached for the up-and-over door. He'd greased the runners, but it still came down with a sound like a dying dinosaur. The whole garage block leaked, and the spaces seemed to have been designed to store Dodg-'em cars, but a lockup was something that Irwin couldn't do without. The car was his living, and out in the open it would be too much of a magnet for vandals and thieves. There were even gangs of ten-year-olds around here who carried bags of tools and who haunted the streets looking for something that they could strip down and carry away, like ants

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

at a high-tech picnic.

As he climbed the sloping path that led through planted borders to the main block, he counted up to the third-floor window that he'd worked out to be one of his own. It looked as lifeless as all the others.

Well, what had he expected? Flags hung out in welcome? She might be in another room, or she might be sleeping off the journey. She might not even be there.

She wasn't.

He could tell, as soon as he walked in and set his grip down. The curtains were as he'd left them, half-drawn against the spring sunlight, and there was a stange silence about the place that seemed to hold itself apart from the traffic outside and the rock music filtering up from the flat below. It was the unmistakable sound of nobody home.

"You unlucky bastard," Pete said as he took off his suit jacket and threw it onto the couch. Now he was going to have to change the Yale lock again; fortunately he had four or five spares in a junk box under the meter cupboard. He'd never actually given his spare key to a hitchhiker before, but with this one the feeling had been different. It had also, apparently, been wrong. He went through to the bathroom to get a couple of aspirins and a glass of water.

Poor sod, he thought, elaborating on a theme as he looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. He'd been out on the road for nine days, but it felt like as many weeks. If disenchantment could have been worn like a halo, he'd have been blinding himself with it.

At least she hadn't turned him into a victim. That would have been *too* much. Only the portable TV and the answering machine were worth taking — everything else dated back to his brother's time as a medical registrar at the teaching hospital half a mile away, and thieves would probably have to be bribed even to show an interest — but that wasn't the point.

The telephone started to ring over on the other side of the sitting room as he opened the door of the bathroom cabinet. The machine would take care of the call; he'd have to run through the whole tape later, anyway, so why scramble?

And besides, there was something here that was demanding his attention.

The glass shelf in the middle of the cabinet had been partly cleared, the spare soap and the nail brush and the dental floss all crowded over at the end to make way for a photograph. It was propped upright at eye level, with the key on the shelf helping it to stay in place.

So, she'd been here! The aspirins forgotton, Pete took the picture through into the sitting room, where the answering machine just switched itself off. *Short message,* he thought absently. *Can't be much of a job.* But his attention was mostly on the mono-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

chrome scene in his hand as he sat next to his discarded jacket.

It was the work of a street photographer. There was Anna, dressed for the road more or less as she'd been when he'd had given her the key. There was a small monkey on her raised arm, wearing a Union Jack waistcoat and tipping a little bowler hat. Pete hadn't seen a shot like it in years; instant-picture cameras and a scarcity of monkeys had probably driven the pavement hustlers into some other business. A few still survived down in London's West End, zeroing in on awestruck foreigners in Piccadilly Circus along Whitehall.

He looked at her face. She'd have been as awestruck as any, if the story that she'd told him had any truth in it, but all that he could see was her sweet smile of triumph. It shone from her eyes like starlight. Pete wondered if he could have faced his own future with as much confidence if they'd had to change places; somehow, he doubted it.

So where was she now?

There was nothing written on the photograph, nothing on the back. She'd left the key, which meant that she didn't intend to return. By her own account she had no ideas, no friends, and very little money. It seemed hard to believe that she'd walk out on a safe haven, freely offered, but she had.

Pete dropped the photograph onto his brother's coffee table. Anna lay there, caught in time and shades of gray, a small part of herself that she'd left in place of good-bye. He sat back, stretched until the blood thundered in his ears, and tried to tell himself that it didn't really matter. He'd made an offer, she'd taken him up on it, and then changed her mind and moved on. End of story.

They'd met on the motorway; or rather, in the cafeteria of one the newer and glossier service areas. By then he'd already run through five courier jobs end-to-end, and he was at the low point that he always seemed to reach when it was late and he was tired and there were still long hours of driving to be faced. She'd moved across the aisle to sit opposite him, and she'd asked if the big gray car was his.

She was around twenty-five, small and slim without appearing fragile. Her light brown hair was tied back, and her skin had a Nordic pallor, whilst her features — especially her deep brown eyes — hinted at some long-forgotton trace of the East. Her clothes were adequate for the weather without being fashionable. Her only luggage was a polythene supermarket bag with a torn handle.

When she spoke, it was with a faint thread of an accent that was like far-off music. She looked straight into his eyes as she asked him for a ride, told him that she wouldn't be hurt if he said no.

Say no? He wouldn't even have

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been able to spell the word.

Wherever he was headed was fine with her. Together they walked across the lit parking area to where the Jaguar waited. For sheer style and presence, it had no competition at this hour; there were a few other cars, a couple of high-sided articulated rigs, and a scattering of medium-sized vans. Other vehicles were just sleeping monster-shapes farther off in the darkness.

As they were getting into the car, one of the rigs started up and pulled away. It flooded the area with light and noise, and Pete glanced across at his passenger. He wondered if she knew what a risk she was taking, traveling alone and trusting strangers.

He also realized that he didn't even know her name. Anna, she told him. Anna Strakhova.

She stayed with him for more than a day. She genuinely had no destination. She was content to tag along on his route around the small provincial towns that the big agencies could cover only by subcontracting. When they stopped to eat, she'd pick the cheapest item on the menu and insist on paying her own way. When Pete had to sleep for a couple of hours, she sat quietly beside him and watched the traffic go by.

And, a little at a time, she told him her story: where she'd come from, how she'd managed to leave, and why.

She told him what would be waiting for her, should she ever return.

He'd finally dropped her off at a motorway interchange on the outskirts of Manchester, with his spare key and a map showing the position of the flat, and all the detailed instructions she could possibly need to explain how to get there. He'd have taken her to the door, but he was late already; he still had the northern part of his run to complete, and it would be another three days before he could join her.

He watched her as she walked up the hard shoulder to the flyover. She turned once and waved. Her smile had stayed with him as he'd driven away, a ghostly afterimage that was like a real presence in the car. She'd put a little light into his life, and it was something that he'd been missing. It was a shock to realize just how much.

Somehow he'd got through. They were the longest three days of his life, and they'd finally brought him to admit to himself how much he'd come to detest this rat-run of an existence that he'd spent more than a year putting together.

But he got up off the couch and headed for the door. By the time the phone started to ring again, he was already on his way down the stairs.

They were called service flats, although most of the services were pretty perfunctory. The public areas were given a monthly going-over by a cleaner that no one ever saw, and a gardener put in an appearance twice a year. That was about all of it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Nearly all of the residents were hospital people, graduate nurses, junior doctors and a couple of West Indian X-ray technicians. Most of them were single, and worked to schedules that were even more erratic than Pete's. He knew everyone slightly, thanks to a mammoth Christmas party that had started small and then spilled out onto one of the landings and ended as a twelve-hour marathon that had left at least three people needing serious treatment. He'd always wondered if there was any truth in all the old erotic myths about nurses; that was the night that he'd found out for himself.

The flat below his own had been the place where it had all started. The Queen album that was pounding away on the other side of the door told him that somebody was home. He knocked.

There was a pause, and then the door opened and suddenly Freddie Mercury was singing, *"Take me, take me, take me to the Dreamers' Ball"* with so much volume that Pete could feel the effects of the shock wave as it rolled over him. Dr. Brian Benson, one of the two young housemen who shared the flat, stood in the doorway and did his best to show some instant guilt.

"Is it the music?" he said. "I'm sorry, Pete, I didn't even know you were back."

"I just arrived," Pete had to raise his voice to say. "Don't worry about it." But Brian was already on his way across to the stereo; Pete followed him into the flat and closed the door behind him. The place was its usual mess — records and magazines everywhere, medical texts and Nick Carter paperbacks, shirts on hangers on the backs of doors; the brand-new Technics rack system and its speakers stood amongst the debris like Stanley Kubrick's monoliths.

Brian touched a control, and the noise was reduced by half. The relief was almost physical, the unwashed glasses on the table next to Pete stopped trembling.

"Only, I just did fifty hours without a break," Brian went on as he straightened up again. He was in his off-duty gear of Levi's sweatshirt, jeans, no shoes. He could convert this to his on-duty gear by adding a white coat and a pair of trainers. "Straight from the wards down into casualty because some bright wonder in the admin wing fouled up and then tried to suggest we sort it out by private arrangements. I dropped a load of speed to keep me going, and now I can't come down."

"Can't you try something else?"

"I'm back on in another five hours; I'd be like a yo-yo. By the way, how did the little red pills suit?"

"Kept me going. Listen, I sent a friend up to stay in the flat. Did you see her at all?"

He showed the photograph. Brian hardly had to give it more than a glance to recognize Anna.

"Oh, she was *yours,* was she?" he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

said. "We all thought she was Mike's bit on the side, with you being away. Well, that's blown his credibility around here."

"Sorry to hear it. Did you see her?"

"We passed on the stairs. Very nice. How did you pull her?"

Pete turned the photograph around and took another look. "I wish I could say I did, but it was all down to the car. I stopped at this place on the motorway, and she came over and asked for a lift. Turned out she didn't even know where she was going, but she'd seen the Jag and it was a like a magnet. She said that big, fast cars had been bringing her luck."

"The same applies to you in this case, old son. What happened, you finished up giving her the key?"

"She had nowhere to go, nowhere to stay. Said she'd been in the country for only two days. Don't mark me down as lovesick or anything, but I'm wondering where she might be."

"Done," Brian said simply, and he dropped onto the arm of the sofa. It was the only part of the furniture clear enough for him to sit. Now that he was in the daylight, Pete could see how long hours and lack of sleep had worked together to make the houseman look edgy and wasted. It was still a young man's face, but the mileage on it was abnormally high. Brian went on, "I wasn't around, but Janis said some weirdo came and took her away. You know what this place is like. Nothing gets missed."

"What kind of weirdo?"

Brian looked at him thoughtfully. He said, "This is really important, is it?"

Pete didn't know how to answer. There was no explaining the unease that he was beginning to feel. "It could be," he said.

Brian came bouncing up; anything to burn off the energy that he could no longer control. "Let's check with Janis, then," he said, and he crossed to the table and dug around underneath to find his battered trainers.

Janis lived one flight down, on the ground floor. On the way, Pete tried to imagine his brother Mike with any kind of a mistress. However he tried it, it wouldn't work out. Michael Irwin was so uptight, he probably couldn't fart without the aid of a shoehorn. When he'd agreed to let Pete have the use of his old flat until the lease ran out, he'd had his medical secretary type up a memorandum that Pete then had to sign. The idea of Mike having any kind of fun at all simply didn't hold together.

Well, that was the price he paid for getting all of the family's brains. Pete Irwin's education had been fast cars and Marvel Comics, in that order. Nurses had come later.

Janis opened her door and looked them over. Her hair was covered by a scarf, and she was wearing a paint-splashed kimono; it didn't take much to work out that they'd caught her in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the middle of a decorating session. "My God, she said, "it must be the Night of the Living Dead." Then she moved back to let them in.

She was a ward sister, a fit-looking forty. She'd been married, but Pete had never known her well enough to ask whether she was widowed or divorced. They went on through into her sitting room, where the furniture was all crowded down to one end so that she could roll back the carpet and get to the skirting boards. Somewhere in the middle of the stack, a portable TV was showing the closing credits of an Open University program. Brian immediately made himself at home, clambering through and making a lying-down space on Janis's Chesterfield.

Pete explained his problem and showed her the photograph. Janis had been outside in the hallway, putting a second coat of gloss on her front door, when Anna had first arrived. "She had a little piece of paper," Janis explained, " and she was looking at all the numbers on the flats. I sent her up to yours."

"Then along came Auschwitz Man," Brian said. He'd found the remote control for the TV, and he was playing around with the channel selector.

"That was the next day," Janis said. "Yesterday."

Pete said, "Why do you call him Auschwitz Man?"

"Only because he looked a bit odd. He was really skinny, but he had a baggy brown overcoat on, and he had really terrible short haircut. He wasn't very old, either. He had a piece of paper, and he was looking at all the flat numbers, too."

"Did you see him go in?"

"I'm not the block snoop, you know," Janis said, but she said it in a friendly, unoffended kind of way. "I didn't see him going in."

"But she saw them going out," Brian supplied.

"Only because I happened to glance out of the window and they were on their way down the path."

"She's a friend of Pete's," Brian said, serious for a moment. "He's worried about her."

"Well . . . she didn't look happy. He was carrying the little Tesco bag she'd arrived with, and they walked out toward the main road. And that," she added, with some extra loudness for Brian Benson's benefit, "was all I saw. . . ."

"Because then she fell off her stepladder and broke the binoculars."

"Just don't get too comfortable," she warned him, and then she turned back to Pete. "Does that help at all?"

"I just don't know. Thanks anyway."

Brian said, "My old housemaster always used to say that if God had meant us to get tangled up with women, he wouldn't have given us small boys and sheep." And then, seeing their blank expression, he explained, "Catholic school. Very progressive."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Out!" Janis roared, in a voice of command that had been electrifying junior doctors for more than fifteen years, and Brian leapt from the sofa and padded meekly to the door. Pete followed.

"Thanks again," he said as they left.

The pain in his head was back, only now it was worse. When he went back into the bathroom and switched on the light over the mirror, he took another look at himself and saw what Janis had meant with her opening remark. Long hours without sleep, plus the little red pills, had given him the same wasted appearance as Brian Benson. It would wear off, he knew . . . or at least, most of it would.

Down below, the music stayed muted. He opened the cabinet again, and this time he found the aspirin bottle. It was empty.

What he really needed was about twenty hours of oblivion followed by some fresh air and sunshine, but he was unlikely to get any of it. Even as he emerged back into the sitting room, the telephone started to ring again. By the time the answering machine had cut in, he'd put his jacket on a wire hanger and put the hanger onto the nearest door.

His agreement with Fleet Transport had been that he'd never have to spend more than seven days away from his base, with a four-day rest period before the next call out. Although they'd broken this on his second time out, it was nothing that he could complain about; he was his own boss, and he was free to turn the work down. This was fine if he wanted to get bounced to the foot of the list of free-lance carriers, but not so good if he wanted to carry on earning. Even at this the money wasn't so great, and he was making more out of the expenses and the mileage allowance; living rent-free and having clear ownership of the car and the answering machine did a lot to keep his overhead down and even allowed him to save . . . but for what? Every time he came home, it was a tape full of calls that tied up his life for the immediate future. Anything beyond that belonged strictly to the dreams-and-schemes department.

Just for once, he'd hoped to break the pattern. Something different to come home to. Some hope.

But even as he was thinking this, there was another part of his mind that was registering a kind of relief. It was as if he'd been taken off a job that he'd secretly believed he wouldn't be able to handle, even though he wouldn't have admitted as much either to the world or to himself. But now there was no point in denying it; Pete's upbringing and outlook were unswervingly provincial, and Anna had been a figure from a land way beyond his small-town horizons.

He got a pad and a Pentel out of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the old walnut sideboard, and took them across to the sofa. When this call had ended, he'd rewind the cassette so that he could hear it through and list all the new jobs. Some of them would be out of deadline already and would have been passed on to other carriers, the rest would probably start with a midnight pickup. Once he'd run the tape, he could crawl away and sleep.

So he waited.

When it came right down to it, he knew almost nothing about her. Born in the country somewhere to the northwest of Leningrad, a long time spent in Soviet prison hospitals where dissidents and would-be èmigrès were quartered amongst the criminally insane, she'd finally managed to leave the Soviet Union by posing as a French schoolteacher, using papers stolen only hours before from a tourist hotel. It all made him feel way out of his depth. And yet. . . .

She'd left him with a small knot of feeling that he couldn't seem to loosen. It sat inside him, as hard and as indigestible as a pebble. He wanted to see her again. The thought of *not* seeing her again — well, it was making him uncomfortable now, and it promised to get worse.

He thought about something that she'd said, out on a long stretch of coast road where the sky had turned gray and the sea was like new iron. They'd been together for a few hours already, and Pete probably hadn't been too successful in disguising the way that his interests were turning.

"I hurt someone once," she said. *"He called me* vodyanoi . . . *you'd say, heartbreaker."* And then she'd blushed, somewhat delicately. A *vodyanoi,* she'd explained, was a kind of lake spirit from her homeland. Very beautiful. Very deadly.

The tape had stopped. He reached over and hit the *Replay* button.

Janis had told him that he looked like one of the living dead, but he was starting to feel more like Death itself. How many departed souls could you cram into the back of a gray Jag? It would be the ultimate in courier jobs, last word in midnight pickups.

He wasn't even listening to the calls. He was looking at Anna's photograph, which he'd dropped back onto the coffee table as he'd walked in. The pad lay on his knee, unused, as the wheels turned and the voice of the Fleet agent blurred into a drone.

Now Pete was thinking about what Janis had told him, and he found it disturbing. His first guess had been wrong; Anna hadn't simply changed her mind and moved on. She'd been persuaded — and by someone who had known where to find her.

If only she'd left him a note with the picture, just a few lines to reassure him that everything was fine. It didn't seem much to ask.

She said, *"I left you a picture to remember me by, Peter. I don't think they'd let me take it back. This is for*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the best. Please don't try to find me."

For a while he sat there with what was probably a stupid, surprised expression on his face, but then when the Fleet dispatcher came back on the line with a tetchy-sounding request for some kind of confirmation on the last five calls, he shook himself out of it. He fumbled the controls, and ran the tape back too far.

When he came to Anna's message again, he turned the volume up as high as it would go without overloading the set's small built-in speaker. That wasn't very high, and the sound quality wasn't exactly the best, but even so he found that it gave him a strange kind of buzz just to hear her again.

I left you a picture. . . . I don't think they'd let me take it back. . . .

It sounded like a phone in a public area, but that was about all he could tell.

Don't try to find me. . . .

He ran it through once more, and then he took the message cassette out of the machine. It was a standard-size Philips. He took it for a little walk.

"S'open," Brian Benson called in response to Pete's knock, and so Pete let himself in. The flat was much as it had been when Pete had last seen it around twenty minutes before, except that Brian had cleared some of the junk off the furniture to make himself enough space to stretch out. He was half-lying, half-sitting, supported by a couple of large cushions and with a magazine open on his knee. He was looking red-eyed and just a little desperate.

Pete said, "I've got a favor to ask."

"Name it."

He showed the cassette. "Can I run this on your tape deck? It'll take only two minutes."

"Go ahead," said Brian expansively. "Treat the machine as if it were paid for."

Pete switched on the power to the tape deck section of the rack, and then reset the amp controls so he'd be able to hear its output. Brian stayed where he was, but he took an interest as Pete ran the message through, first without any distortion and then with different settings of the treble and bass controls. As it played, he switched the noise-reduction circuit in and out, dialed his way through the buttons for the different oxide types.

They made a difference, but not as much as he needed. He rewound and started again.

By now Brian had got the idea of what Pete was trying to do. He dropped his magazine on the floor and came over. "You should be using the equalizer for that," he said.

The graphic equalizer was a separate unit in the rack, with a dozen vertical slide controls. Each one made it possible to alter a small range of frequencies without affecting the rest of the sound; magic time, as far as Pete was concerned. Brian showed him

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

how to remove the tape hiss and the phone-line hum.

Then, on his own, Pete started to take out as much of Anna's voice as he could.

It was really just a question of finding a balance. They were working with telephone quality, and twelve sliding faders didn't exactly give them an infinite degree of control; but after a few minutes' work, they were getting an output that was considerably cleaner and clearer, even if it no longer sounded remotely natural.

"What does that sound like to you?" Pete said. He'd sharpened up the background as far as it would go.

"Somebody being paged," Brian said. "Could be a hospital."

"Or a hotel."

They tried it again. The pattern of the word "reception" was easy to recognize, even though Anna was speaking over part of it. Pete thought that a hotel would be more likely than a hospital; Auschwitz Man had come for Anna yesterday, and they must have stayed somewhere.

They could even agree on the name; "McGregor," they both thought, "Mr. McGregor to reception."

And that was all they could get.

"Thanks for the help," Pete said at last, removing his cassette from the machine and standing. He'd crouched for so long that his joints had started to seize up.

"Anytime," Brian said. "You going to try to find her?"

"You heard the message. She doesn't want me to."

"If she *really* didn't want you to, she wouldn't have phoned," Brian said, and he tapped the side of his head knowingly. And then he yawned, so suddenly that he surprised himself.

"Thanks anyway," Pete said.

Back in his own flat, he dug out a two-year-old copy of the *Yellow Pages* and turned to the hotel section. It took him half an hour of ringing around to find the place, and then he hung up before McGregor could answer his room phone.

He sat for a while longer, thinking about it. Then he took his jacket from its wire hanger and went out.

The hotel was few miles from the airport, a four-star concrete tower with a small landscaped parking lot at its side. Pete left the car in an empty bay and walked around to the entrance.

Automatic doors let him through into the lobby, where the lights were low and the carpet was deep and there was Muzak creeping around in the background. The only bright spots were the lit display cases on this lower part of a split level, some showing ranges of perfumes and others with famous-name accessories folded to show their Parisian labels. The hotel shop itself was closed, the glass counter-cases empty and unlit. One thing was certain, Pete thought as he headed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

toward the business end of the lobby: If Anna was here, someone else was definitely in charge of the bills.

He straightened his tie, which had spent the past fifteen hours rolled up and stuffed into his jacket pocket, and climbed to the main level. He knew he didn't really look the part, but it was the best he could do.

The girl behind the reception counter listened to his story with patient and practiced understanding, but she couldn't conceal a glimmer of suspicion that danced behind her eyes as Pete explained about a lost appointment book and the need for urgent contact with business associates he couldn't even name. The glimmer became a constant and cold flame as he produced Anna's picture and tried to describe Auschwitz Man in less bizzare terms than the ones Janis had used.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But we have more than two hundred people in the hotel. Unless you can give me a name. . . ."

"Try Strakhova," Pete said, and then he spelled it if for her just as Anna had spelled it for him. He stood with his arms folded, leaning on the high counter as she typed a few words into a free standing keyboard and then read the results from a screen directly below him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "No one of that name's registered." And she gave him a small, regretful, and unmistakably final smile.

"O.K.," Pete said. "Thanks."

What now? The obvious answer was to go home and forget all about it. Not his affair, none of his business. For all he knew, Anna might not be here and probably never had been. He could hang around for only so long before a couple of the porters would come over and suggest his departure in tones that would be completely out of character with their mickey mouse uniforms; glancing back toward the reception desk as he wandered across the lobby, he saw the girl look up. He turned away before their eyes could meet.

He needed a couple of minutes to think. He'd never exactly rated himself as a high-powered intellect, and he was starting to feel way out of his depth. What kind of place was this to be looking for someone who could pack everything she owned into a single carrier bag? Who asked strangers for rides and didn't even care which way they were heading? Face it, Irwin, he told himself, you're wasting your energy when there's none to spare. In case it had slipped your mind, you've a living to make. The fact that the hotel lobby had three public pay phones that were within earshot of the coffee shop's paging system didn't make it certain that she'd called from here. And McGregors could be found anywhere.

Damn it, this wasn't working. He was supposed to be talking himself *out* of it.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He walked toward the magazine stall, which was in a brightly lit alcove screened from the phones by some freestanding palms. He was going to get some change, and then call Fleet. A browser who hadn't bought anything was leaving the stall as he arrived, and Pete stepped aside to let him pass.

He couldn't help staring. The man was young, thin-faced, with pale eyes the color of the sea. He brushed by Pete with a brief, embarrassed nod of acknowledgment, but he didn't say anything. Pete watched as he went toward the lower level, and moved to the rail to keep him in sight as he reached the steps.

He wasn't in a hurry to get anywhere. He stopped at the first of the cases, which held a few Swiss watches on a pyramid display of clear plastic cubes, and he studied the overall effect before leaning in for a closer look. Gently he touched the glass.

Auschwitz Man.

A couple of aircrew walked by, carrying their flight bags. The thin-faced man took a hurried step back, hands down by his sides as if to show that he had nothing in mind. He looked haunted, permanently scared; but even at this distance there was something showing through that was slicker and darker and far less likely to appeal to anyone's sympathy. The crewmen didn't even notice him. When they'd gone by, he moved back to the case, but he didn't take his eyes off their backs until they'd gone out through the automatic doors to where their courtesy bus was waiting.

"Peter?" Anna said from about ten feet away. She sounded as if she couldn't believe it.

She'd just emerged from the magazine stall, and she was standing with the glare of the fluorescent lights behind her. She had no topcoat, and she was wearing what appeared to be a new fine-knit pullover; otherwise, she was exactly as she'd been when she'd waved good-bye from the overpass sliproad. She was carrying a copy of *Vogue,* holding it carefully against her like a rare thing that she planned to keep undamaged for a long time. She looked stunned.

"I told you not to follow me," she said, and then she looked out over the rail; her strange companion on the lower level was just beginning to return his attention to the display. Anna stepped forward and took Pete's arm, and she pulled him over to the palms where they couldn't be seen.

Even though he didn't understand the situation here, he felt an almost physical relief at finding her. He said, "I assume this means you're being taken back?"

"Tonight. It's all arranged."

"But you're not exactly under guard."

She gave a nervous shrug and looked at the floor. "I couldn't have telephoned you if I were. I'm . . . cooperating."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pete was watching her carefully. He was realizing that he'd learned more about her face from the photograph than he had in all their time together. For some reason she wouldn't meet his eyes.

He said, "So how did they manage to find you?"

"They never lost me. I was followed from the moment I landed in the country. Pavel came over, and they sent him in to talk to me. He's right, I shouldn't stay. He knows things about me. . . ." Here her voice caught a little, showing the strain that she was feeling. "Things even I don't know."

"How many of them are there?"

"Just Pavel now," she said, and then she touched his hand briefly. "I have to go or he'll come looking for me. Good-bye, Peter."

She started to move, but he was faster; he got in front of her and said, "Wait a minute. All that stuff you were telling me, about the prison hospital and the false papers. It was all true?"

"Of course."

"Well, don't you know what they'll do to you when they get you home?"

"I'm finding it very hard to think of anything else," she said, and she made another attempt to get by. But it was strangely halfhearted, and Pete was able to block her way again.

"So *why go*?" he said, unable to believe that she was having so much difficulty in seeing what should have been obvious. "What's to stop you from walking out with me now?"

"People are looking at us," she warned him, and he looked around. He'd hardly raised his voice at all, but in the hush-whisper atmosphere of the lobby, it had been enough to rise above the weeping strings of the piped music. One of the people whose attention he'd managed to attract was the girl behind the check-in desk.

He took a step back, but this time Anna didn't try to move away. She said, "I can't explain it to you."

"Can't?"

Now she looked at him levelly. "All right, won't. It's something I don't want you to know."

"Would you rather tell the police? Or the press?"

"What do you mean?"

"I could put them onto you; it wouldn't be hard." Pete was hearing himself and hardly believing what he was saying. "This place would be like a circus within the hour, and you'd be the main atttraction. Try keeping your secrets from them."

Anna stared at him. She stared for so long, he began to wonder whether she was going to speak at all. When she did, her voice was unexpectedly quiet.

"There's something you have to see," she said, and she glanced around. Auschwitz Man — Pavel — was nowhere in sight, and everyone else's attention had drifted away from them again.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

She moved, and Pete followed. On the far side of the telephones was a door marked *Staff*. Anna tried it, and it opened. They went through.

The transformation was instantaneous and complete. They moved from the plush of the lobby to the bare cast-concrete of a service passageway, one side of it stacked waist-high with unopened boxes of cleaning materials. The lighting was patchy; only two bulbs were working, one just inside the door and the other about halfway along to the fire door at the far end. The pools they cast were pale and sharp-edged, leaving a good part of the area in near darkness.

Pete closed the door quietly behind him, shutting out the Muzak and all the set dressing that lay no more than an inch deep over the low-rent reality that surrounded them now. Anna had gone on a few yards, but now she'd stopped. She was a silhouette in the darkness, no more than a step beyond the light.

"This is the truth," she said, and she raised her hand.

It came into the light. But it *wasn't* her hand, not as he remembered it; this was fish-belly, delicately veined in moss green. It was slim and elegant like Anna's . . . but it was clawed.

"This is what you're asking for," she went on. "Know what I am."

The hand turned. She held it relaxed, palm up. Pete was transfixed. When she flexed her fingers in a lazy kind of gesture, he heard a faint clicking like that of well-oiled gears.

She took a step forward and came fully into the light. She seemed to stand a little taller, her eyes blazing with the green of the deep, her skin washed with the pallor of the drowned. He hair was coiled, wet, dark, glistening like weed.

Pete tried to look into her eyes, but could see nothing deeper than their glittering surface. She blinked once, so fast that he almost missed it, a shutterlike movement of a milky inner eyelid.

He wanted to ask her a question, but nothing came out. He was still holding on to the door, and the door was holding him up.

"The form is dormant in the winter," she explained, still moving toward him. "Come the spring, it emerges. It feeds."

"On what?" Pete managed.

"On love and misery, misery and love. I'll come with you, Peter. But for your own sake, don't ever fall in love with me."

She was passing through the shadows now, moving across the darkness between the two areas of light. Pete said, "And the rest of it? About the hospital?"

"All true. How else would you treat my kind?"

She stepped back into the light. She was Anna again, only inches away from him now.

"I have to get my things," she said. "I don't have much; you know I don't.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wait for me outside, in your car. I'll slip out while Pavel's in the shower. I won't be long — he's been showering two, three times a day."

The way she talking now, it was as if she'd uncovered something unremarkable for him — a piece of furniture, something new to wear. Somehow he unstuck himself from the door and moved aside to let her out.

She paused, and kissed him lightly as she passed.

Pete walked out of the hotel in a daze. If he hadn't known better, he'd have been tempted to believe his eyes. Instead, he thought of the long hours that he'd spent on the road, and the exhaustion that he felt, and the little red pills that Brian Benson had given to him before he'd set out.

Never again, he thought. Just get me through this one time, God, and I promise, never again.

And then he wondered if he'd be able to keep that strange, awesomely real vision out of his mind. Just awhile longer, and then you can lock all the doors and draw all the curtains and give yourself over to the ministering angel.

The Jaguar was still alone in the fading light of the afternoon, and he remembered to give it his customary once-around check before opening up. Bubbles in the paintwork on the most heavily rebuilt sections were the sign that he feared the most, because they'd spread in weeks and lose him the up-marketing chauffering jobs where appearances counted. Fleet had assigned him oilmen, company executives and, once, an assize court judge; none of them would have been happy to pay Fleet prices in order to travel in a rusty crate.

"Ohhh, shit," he said wearily, and he crouched down by the front wheel arch on the passenger side. He ran his fingers over the paint surface; there was a definite blister coming up by the door pillar, about half an inch across. He pressed his thumbnail against its center and felt the paint crack. A drop of rusty-looking water came out.

Pete straightened up, wiping his hand on his trousers. He shouldn't have been surprised. The car had stood for too long in the breaker's yard before he'd found it with most of its front end ripped away and its roof caved in. Not even the wide boys from the used-car showrooms had wanted to touch it.

He got in behind the wheel and reclined the seat a couple of notches. He didn't really want to be thinking about this, not now. He wonderd how long it would be before Anna could get away.

She'd smiled when she'd walked out to the Jaguar, back there in the motorway stopping area. *Big cars have been bringing me luck,* she'd said, and she'd reached out and briefly touched the wing as if to assure herself that it was real. Pete supposed they didn't have much like it, back

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where Anna had come from.

How long? He turned on the radio and settled back. He'd opted into the middle of a country song from a local station. It was strange, but he didn't even feel tired.

He was asleep within a couple of minutes.

Anna jerked him out of it, rapping on the glass of the passenger door. He reached across and took the lock off, trying to shake himself awake as he did. He didn't know how long he'd been out; there was still light, but a lot less of it. Half an hour at least, perhaps more.

"I think he got suspicious," Anna said as she got in. She'd managed to bring her overcoat and her magazine and the two plastic carrier bags that represented her expanded luggage. "Let's go."

The engine turned over easily and caught at the first try. They eased into the main aisle and turned toward the exit.

But before they'd made half the distance, a figure came stalking out from behind the screen of bushes that divided the parking lot from the hotel forecourt. It saw them and stopped.

Pavel was standing squarely in the way, peering at the approaching car and trying to make out their faces through the windscreen. He'd obviously dressed in a panicking hurry, and his hair was wet and uncombed. He recognized Anna and tried to wave them down.

Pete held on until the last moment, but the Russian held his ground. There was no way they could get by him. Pete hit the brakes and spun the wheel, and the Jag went into a skidding left-handed turn. There was a blur in the rearview mirror that looked awfully like a Jensen that he'd noticed on his way in, but the Jag's arcing tail end must have missed it by inches. The slide ended, and Pete was back in control.

There was a gap in the bushes almost directly ahead. There were no-entry symbols on either side of it and a sign that said *Service Access Only*, but this wasn't a time to be too choosy. He went for it.

Anna turned around in her seat to look back, but even in desperation Pavel wouldn't be able to follow fast enough to keep up. The service road brought them out the other side of the bushes and along behind the back of the hotel. There were no people and no windows here, just roll-down metal doors covering loading bays, and large galvanized trash hoppers standing ready to be emptied. The road surface was of stained concrete, and the Jaguar's tires drummed as Pete changed down to make the turn that would bring them back around the other side of the hotel.

"He'll head us off," Anna protested but Pete reckoned he knew what he was doing.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We'll be gone before he gets halfway," he said.

But this part of the service circuit didn't seem as well used as the one they'd entered by; windblown rubbish had collected along the sheltered side of the building, and old newspapers had plastered themselves along the chain fence to their left, flapping in the wind like rags on barbed wire. Pete should have been sensing danger already. He could see the end of the lane and the hotel forecourt some way farther on, but there were too many shadows in between.

By the time he'd reached for the headlight switch, it was too late. There wasn't enough stopping distance between the car and the two slim metal pillars, no more than three feet high, that had been locked into place at the end of the road to keep visitor traffic out.

He braked, but the car plunged forward on four tracks of smoking rubber. He felt totally helpless for about eight-tenths of a second, and then they hit.

The right-hand pillar took the main force of the Jaguar, and it folded. Anna was wearing no belt, and he tried to grab her and hold her down, but she was thrown shoulder-first against the dash before bouncing back as the car rocked to a stalling halt. It was almost as if they'd been hooked; and they had, by the left-hand pillar.

The engine had cut out, and there was silence. A part of Pete's mind had already registered the fact that the radiator still seemed to be in one piece; the rest of his mind, rather belatedly, turned to his passenger.

"Are you hurt?" he said.

Anna was rubbing her shoulder. "I'm all right. Get me away."

"We'll have to stay and explain this."

She stared at him with a ferocity that he wouldn't have believed possible. "Understand something," she said. "It's too late! We've started; we can't go back!"

He wanted at least to get out and look at the damage, but she caught his wrist and stopped him. He couldn't stare her down; he didn't even want to try. After the stunt that he'd managed to pull, he didn't feel that he could muster the dignity for it.

So instead, he tried the engine. It restarted with no problem.

There was now enough of a gap to get through, but they were hard up against the unbroken pillar. Pete tried to move them forward a little, and was rewarded with a screech of tearing metal. He took it an inch at a time, and the screech became a low, aching grind. A cruel-minded midget with a buzz saw could have given them the same kind of effect.

Suddenly they were free. Something was rubbing on one of the tires, but they could move. They came out of the alley and around onto the hotel forecourt. Anna was flexing her shoulder; nothing seemed broken, but she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was likely to get some bad bruises. He couldn't see Pavel, but he saw the astonished looks on the faces of some people who were waiting for taxis.

He didn't want to stop and get out. Whatever they were gaping at, he didn't want to have to see it.

But he had no choice unless he wanted to have a tire shredded, and so after a half mile he started to look for a lay-by. It was the end of the afternoon, and rush-hour traffic was starting to build up; he was feeling pressured by the heavy lorries that came in close to his tail and tried to force him to pick up speed, and it was with some relief that he saw a *Parking* sign directing him onto a weedy-looking spur that looked like a leftover turning circle from a time when the road had been widened. There was one other car already stopped, a grimy white caravan with *Drinks 'n Snacks* hand-lettered in red on its side. The caravan's shutters were up.

The Jaguar bumped to a halt on the rough surface. They both got out together; Anna had some difficulty opening her door.

When Pete came around to her side, he could see why. The car had been torn open like an old tin can, a four-foot rip that started just behind the headlight and burrowed back across the door to end in a shallow crease. All of his restoration work was painfully on display; there seemed to be more aluminum mesh and fiberglass matting than original metal.

"Well," he said, "there goes the business." And he crouched down for a closer look.

Anna hesitated before she spoke. "I've got some money, still. It isn't much, but you can have it all."

"Money won't do it," he said, thinking that if he had to look for a bright side, at least he wasn't going to have to worry about the paint blister he'd found. He didn't even have to probe around to see that the section had begun to rust from the inside outward, and badly. He'd wire-brushed it, scoured it, and treated it; but obviously not well enough.

Anna said tentatively, "Don't people with cars have, you know, insurance?"

So he explained about the motorway crash in which two people had died, and about how he'd paid an over-the-top price for the resulting heap of scrap in order to get his hands on the registration documents that said that the heap, whatever it looked like, was still a Jaguar. From this rock-bottom beginning, he'd done his best to re-create an up-market vehicle.

"But as far as the insurance is concerned," he explained, pulling on the part of the wing that had fallen to touch the wheel, "it's still worth next to nothing." It bent away easily. Too easily he noted as he got to his feet again.

"Can't you rebuild it?"

"I could. But I don't think I will." They'd be talking about several months of work just to seal in the decay and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

restore the surface; and that was about as much as he could ever hope to do.

He took another look at the front end, but the damage here was minimal in comparison, just a neat, deep V in the chromework backed by a foot-long split in the fiberglass bonnet that he'd fitted because there had been so little left of the original. A feature like that would be a giveaway to a dealer, but a half-talented amateur mechanic might fall for it at an auction. Perhaps he'd make enough out of a sale to pick up a reliable saloon, or even a small van.

Anna said, "What are we going to do now?"

He looked at her. She was standing holding her bruised shoulder, looking small and unexpectedly vulnerable. "They know your apartment," she went on, and from the way she said it he realized that she was trying to give him a gentle introduction to some less-than-encouraging realities. "We're talking about the Cheka, the people you'd call the KGB. I'm an illegal with no papers. I tried to warn you, Peter. But you didn't want to listen."

"Yeah," he agreed dispiritedly, and gave the car's number plate a nudge with his shoe. It moved, but it didn't fall off. "Too much shine on the armor. I must have been dazzled."

"And now you're sorry."

"Sorry?" he said, and he thought of how he'd felt when he'd believed that he wouldn't see her again. Somehow this managed to make an even deeper mark than that one weird moment in the hotel when he'd felt as if he'd been led to the edge of the world and encouraged to take a peek over into the abyss.

"Now," he said, "I'm not sorry."

They both stood looking at the damage for a few moments longer, and then Pete slowly walked around to get back into the car. Anna did the same. He didn't restart the engine straightaway, but he sat with his hands folded on the wheel as he contemplated the wildlife around the parking area. This consisted mainly of birds picking over the mound of old bricks and rubble that screened the spur from the main part of the road, and of a few cows that could be glimpsed in the fields on the far side of a straggly hedge.

What he was actually seeing was a vision of himself with no Jag but with a little red van, pulling into the service bays of large office buildings and ringing a bell for attention like any messenger boy. In the vision he wore a brown warehouseman's overall, and he carried a clipboard. A small-businessman.

Yeah, about nine inches tall.

He said, "I'm going to see if I can get my old job back. Ted said he'd always be willing to have me. We'll find a place, and you can stay with me until you've worked out what you're going to do. How does that sound?"

Anna had been sitting in silence. Now she said, "I don't know. Where is it?"

"A place called Three Oaks Bay."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Working at Ted Hammond's Auto-Marine, where Hammond had let him live over the workshop and had even given him the space to work on the restoration, had probably been the best time of Pete's life. It was a pity that he hadn't realized it until after he'd left.

Anna said, "Is it near the sea?"

"By a lake," Pete said, and he saw her interest suddenly increase. *A lake spirit*, he thought. *Very beautiful. Very deadly.* "It's not much, just a village and a boatyard and a lot of mountain woodland. Plenty of room to get lost in. *Now* how does it sound?"

Anna smiled. It was a faint, knowing smile, and Pete wasn't sure he liked it too much.

"It sounds fine," she said.

Pete started the car.

They made a late evening stop on the outskirts of the last town of any size on their route. It was a transport cafe, bright and busy even at this late hour, and it was from the TV on a high angled shelf in the corner that they learned about Pavel. He'd made it to first place in the second half of the ITN news, with a thirty-foot jump from a motorway overpass about half a mile from the hotel. The fall hadn't killed him, and neither had the lorry into whose path he'd dropped, thanks to a fast reaction from the driver. But then witnesses over on the far carriageway had seen him crawling, both ankles shattered, back up the grass embankment for a second attempt.

The police had arrived just in time to bag up the remains.

Pete and Anna left their table and their food, and returned to the car. Neither of them said anything.

They left the town behind, and drove up on a switchback of a mountain road that crested at a narrow pass and then took them down in a darkness that was silent and complete. Solid woodland pressed up against the road on both sides, tightly planted stands of commercial forest broken only by dirt roads and drainage beds. There was a moon, but its light didn't seem to be getting anywhere ... at least, not until they'd made it over the final pass and begun their last descent into the sinuous valley system. Then, as Pete brought them out of a steep turn that was almost a hairpin, he heard Anna make a small sound as if she'd been holding her breath.

He stopped the car so that she'd be able to see. The moonlight was on the lake, giving it a dull gunmetal shine. It was wide, flat, impossibly calm, with a couple of wooded islands standing close to one shore like delicate silhouettes cut from black paper. There was no way of telling its length from here, but Pete knew that they were seeing only a small part of it.

He turned to Anna. Her eyes met his own, green and burning with their

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cold fire of the deep. He took her hand, and she didn't pull away; her skin was like marble, dead and empty of warmth, the hand of a living statue that gripped and didn't let go.

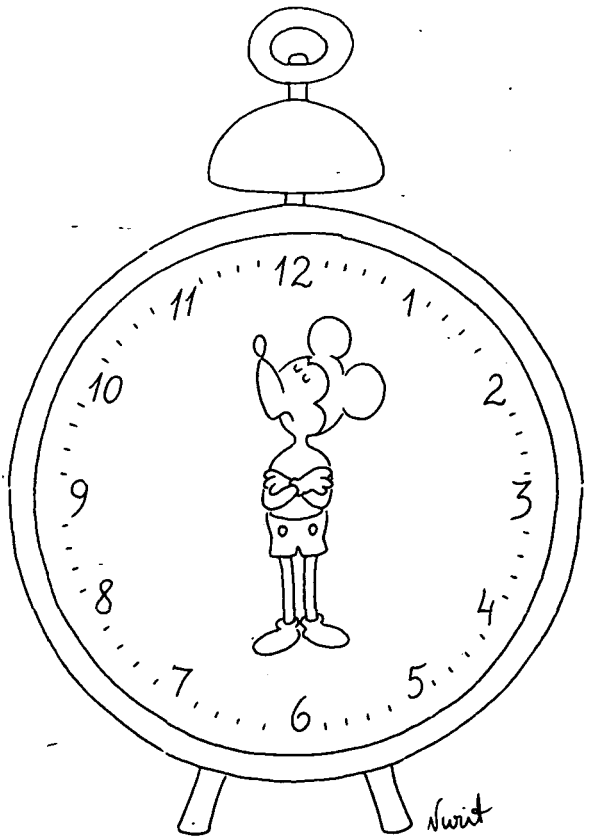
"Remember," she whispered, her whisper a warning; and then the moment passed and she released him, just a young girl Pierrot-painted by moonlight.

Pete let out the clutch, and they started down toward the lake. He didn't look at her again. Something within him was trembling, getting ready to give way.

Vodyanoi.

Heartbreaker.

Wasn't that how they said it?



LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This story is about an American who visits Hong Kong during Earth's final days, as a stray planetoid heads for impact somewhere in Northern China. It is an unusual and distinctive variation on a classic science fiction theme.

The Great Wall

BY
WAYNE WIGHTMAN

The Alien

Primary Motivation: Existence
Energy Level: 2%
Libido Index: 0 ±0.5

Bedtime Story

Larrie, unless you settle down, I'm not going to read this to you. I went to a lot of trouble to learn to read so I could do this with you at night before you went to sleep. You want me to turn on Mr. Voxxo and let him tell you one of his gooky stories? O.K., that's better. This story is called "How the Great Wall of China Became a River of Honey and Brought About the Happy Years," and it really did happen many, many years ago. Larrie, you do that once more, and I'm going to turn on the sleep inducer. All right.

Once upon a long time ago, the thing awakened. It didn't know who it was or where it was or what it was supposed to do. It just woke up and wondered. It thought that just being there was a wonderful thing. But then it realized that it was alone, and merely being wasn't such a wonderful thing, after all. It was lonely, and it became very sad.

Now, this may sound surprising, but all at once, it looked around itself. It had never done this before because it had always been too busy looking inside itself and wondering who it was and where it was and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

what it was supposed to do. But it looked around itself, and what do you suppose it saw? Very, very far away, it saw hundreds and thousands of little clumps of stars — some of them in little pinwheels; others in little rippled, stippled clouds; and some hung alone and glowing in the darkness like Christmas tree ornaments. For the first time, it saw something outside itself, and it thought, "This is very nice!"

The thing had nothing else to do, so it decided to go and have a closer look at the biggest, nearest pinwheel.

Soon it discovered that although these stars were very lovely, they were a long, long way away, and as it traveled, it became sadder, realizing how easy it was to be alone.

Sometimes, as it journeyed through space, it slept, and during these times it heard little voices talking somewhere inside itself, and sometimes it saw pictures with these voices.

"You are not an 'it'" a quiet voice said. "You are a ***hiftia***, and this is what you look like."

And somewhere inside the hiftia was a picture of a round mottled sphere. It was gray and dappled with brown, and on its top and bottom it had huge white spots.

"So I am a hiftia," it thought when it awakened. "I *am* a hiftia, and I think I am rather pretty!" It was proud to be a hiftia and to have such a colorful shape. . . but then it frowned — or it would have frowned if it had had a face. "I am a pretty hiftia," it thought sadly, "but I am a lonely hiftia."

And again, it was disappointed. What at first it thought was a delight turned into a depression-tinged surprise.

Not knowing what else to do, the hiftia traveled on and on, and each time it awakened, it was a little closer to the pinwheel of stars it had decided to investigate. Much time passed, and once when the hiftia awakened, it realized that the pinwheel filled most of the sky — its slinging streamers rose up in front of it and trailed back over the top edge of the pinwheel and disappeared far, far away behind the glowing, bulging center. The hiftia could feel the warmth of the pinwheel on its skin — it had never felt warmth before, and it became so excited that the hiftia found it hard to sleep.

But the very next time it dozed off, one of the many voices inside showed a picture and said very softly, "Look at this."

First of all, the hiftia saw itself floating in a sea of light. All around were globes of fire, and the hiftia swam in the light like a fish swims in water. It was the best place the hiftia had ever imagined. It reveled in the light and warmth. And then it saw the most amazing thing: It saw what it knew it had been looking for the whole time. It saw a sphere that was gray and dappled with brown and had a huge white spot on its top and on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

its bottom. The hiftia felt something tickling under its skin — this is what a hiftia feels when it's curious. It looked again, and on one of the larger brown spots there appeared a peculiar pattern of curling, forking lines — and all at once, all of a sudden, without any warning or reason in the world, the hiftia felt crazy, happy, jittering shivers run through it this way and that; and it felt hot and cold and ticklish and hollow and explosive, all at the same time.

The hiftia woke up from the vision and would have been smiling and breathing hard if it had had a mouth to smile with or a nose to breathe through. Little warm tremors echoed back and forth across its surface like earthquakes. Giggles bubbled in its core, and then, all at once, it knew what it was supposed to do.

It was supposed to look for another hiftia, one with those peculiar curling, forking lines on it, and then . . . *then* it would no longer be lonely. It hurried into the spiral of stars. It rushed, its body tingling.

The Human

Steven Tiedeau knew of people whose lives were endless chains of crisis, each calamity followed by a catastrophe, adversity followed by affliction. His life was not like this, and sometimes he wished it were — at least he would know where he stood in the scheme of things.

Steven Tiedeau would walk into a rose garden and find that it had just been sprayed with a carcinogenic bug killer. Once, a lovely blond woman whom he had been courting for two months, treating her with infinite care, pulled off her blouse, showed him the scars on her back, and confided with a weird grin that she liked to be beaten with pig whips. When he first met the woman he would later marry, his hormones seized him by the throat and threw him at her. She had an IQ in the vicinity of 165; her sexual appetites were Mississippian; she was beautiful, robust, with an expansive curiosity. A week after their marriage, she had a religious experience, arranged for breast-reduction surgery, became celibate, sold her books, went on a macrobiotic diet, and meditated five hours a day. He stayed married four years, suspecting that he had discovered the unspoken secret of life that everyone knew but that no one admitted: That beauty was skin-deep but that ugliness went right to the bone. For the next six years, he swam in an existential miasma of tired questions that had depressing answers. "Who am I?" *Who knows? Who cares?* "Why am I?" *Ha!* "Is this it?" *You'd better believe it.*

In his bleak apartment, he was too funked to do much besides feed and sleep. At work, however, his duties were so mechanical that he could daydream. As he handled many densely inscribed documents that elucidated

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the claims of the wealthy against the state, he would pretend he was a character in a novel by Joseph Conrad. . . . He was in a small cabin on a ship bound for the Antilles, due to arrive in a few days. . . . He would finish his paperwork shortly . . . go up on deck, stand in the blazing tropical sun, and he would see the dense chaos of jungle rising out of the swelling waters . . . smell the sun-cooked, sea-wet boards of the deck . . . hear the gulls. . . . But he never went up on deck, never stood in the fire of the tropical sun. At 5:00 he went home and took a hot shower.

On May 1, for reasons he could not explain, he drank fourteen cans of beer between 7:00 and 9:35 in the evening. Somewhere around 11:00, he realized he was sitting cross-legged beside one of his four living room walls, banging his head against it. And then a light went on: That's what he'd been doing all his life — not so overtly, of course, but that's what he'd been doing. Not only was it his head hitting the wall, but he was the wall, too.

On May 2 he resigned his job, bought fashionable pants, several slick shirts, and two pairs of shoes that felt better than they looked. He told the travel agent that he wanted to go to Hong Kong. Why Hong Kong? Because he liked the picture of the place in the travel agent's window. This, thought Steven Tiedeau, is going to be great. That was May 2.

Then, on May 4, came the news that the astronomers were now positive that the stray planetoid they had been watching for weeks was definitely going to impact the Earth. There was no longer any doubt. No longer any hope. The ticket had been pulled. On June 22, they said, most likely everyone was going to die. At first there were a few riots, a few governments overthrown, but then everything went back to normal.

On the evening of May 4, Steven Tiedeau smoked three joints he'd kept in the bottom of his sock drawer for two years and left for Hong Kong.

About two weeks later, on a fine morning in mid-May, he floated leisurely in a rented sailboat out in the middle of Hong Kong Harbor, and he watched the sun as it defied gravity and rose out of the Pacific and turned the mountains of China red as blood.

"For the first time in years," he thought, "I am not expecting something better to happen. *This* is it." And he liked it. "I am where I want to be." His thoughts paused. "Although I won't be here long." There were only thirty-three days left.

The morning water was glassy-smooth. He hung over the edge, letting the sail go slack, and dozed as the climbing sun warmed the side of his face.

He was awakened by splashing. He jerked up, fearing for a moment that he was back in Omaha on his waterbed. But it was a swimmer, a full

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

half-mile from shore, splashing with strong, even strokes a dozen yards from his boat. She glanced across at him once and smiled — she was Chinese or Japanese — then she suddenly changed course and swam to his boat, pulling herself up with her elbows hooked over the edge. She wasn't wearing a top and her breasts were pressed up in round bulges.

"Hi," she said. "I was swimming by and thought if you didn't mind, I'd rest a moment." She was lovely. Beads of water dripped around her eyes and down her sharp cheekbones. Around her face and across he shoulders, her wet hair was slick as glass, as black as anything.

"I was dozing," Steven said. "Would you like a ride to shore?"

"Oh, no. I swim across here every morning. I'm just a little farther out today than usual." She craned her neck a little to see his boat. "You like Conrad," she said, seeing the book. "He's very good."

Steven tried not to look at the way her breasts were edging higher over the side of the boat. "I, um, was going to read it, but I decided I didn't want someone else's adventures in my life."

She smiled a little and shrugged. "In a few weeks, we're all going to have a great adventure. Something that's never happened to anyone before."

"What I mean is, I want something before then. I want—" He felt shy and tongue-tied. "I want something good, something interesting to happen to me before then." He almost laughed. "*This*," he said, "is pretty interesting."

"I'm opposite," she said. "I've been taken all over the world, pulled this way, pulled that way, and I ran away finally, just to have a few weeks of peace and silence before. . . ."

Steven nodded. He understood. They both understood.

Steven took a deep breath. He was going to do something he never dreamed he could do. His hand went out and rested on hers. "Come with me," he said.

She slipped off the edge of the boat like an eel. "I have to finish my swim."

"Let me take you back in."

She treaded water beside the boat, her hands flashing like pale fish. "I would disappoint you," she said. "If you knew me—" She turned and swam away, her black hair trailing behind her like a swath of black water.

"What's your name?" he called after her.

She swam strongly away — then she suddenly turned and called back, "Omiya!"

Steven leaned against the side of the boat and watched her disappear in the distance. The sun was warm on his legs, and the air was fragant with a kind of mustiness that might have come from the floors of the ancient forests that grew on the mountains of China. This, he realized, was the best

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

place he had ever been. But with Omiya gone, finally out of sight, he felt a kind of hollowness behind his eyes. It was a familiar feeling . . . as familiar as being alone again. But for a moment there, he had had that hormonal rush that he had all but forgotten about. For a moment there, he had almost felt alive.

The Alien

Primary Motivation: Curiosity
Energy Level: 17%
Libido Index: 5.6 ± 2 (fluctuating)

Bedtime Story

Larrie, would you please stop fiddling with the gravity controls and pay attention?

At last, the hiftia entered the great pinwheel of stars. Such light and warmth it had never known and had never ever suspected. The radiance and beauty of this patterned chaos was greater than all its dreams and greater than the promises of the voices that whispered and sang inside it. This braided flowing river of light made the hiftia want to be everywhere at once, do everything at once, and see the entire universe in one infinite moment.

For the first time, it loved being where it was. It cavorted like a soap bubble among these floating gloves of of fire. It looped and swung about this star and that — it dived between circling pairs of stars, soaking up their heat, and then it would throw itself farther toward the center of the spiral, where there would be more stars and more stars to play among.

But all the while, deep inside the hiftia, the small, quiet voices were saying, "Don't forget! Look for another of your kind! Don't forget!" and the hiftia would feel the sick twinge of loneliness that was a hollowness somewhere deep, deep inside it. At those moments, something would shudder inside the hiftia, its gravity would flicker, and everything would heave uneasily. This is what a hiftia feels when it is afraid. For all the fun it was having playing in a galaxy of stars, it would have traded all of it for a friend.

When it slept, the voices would show it pictures of the brown and gray sphere with the pattern of peculiar lines on its surface. "This is your friend," the many voices would whisper in chorus. "This is a hiftia, this is what to look for. Don't forget!"

So as it played closer and closer to the center of the spiral of stars, it always looked, always kept alert, always searched for a friend.

Sometimes it wondered what it would do when it met another of its kind — would the voices inside them talk? Would they play together? Would they melt into one great, grand hiftia? But whenever the hiftia started visualizing another of its kind, a little bit of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

craziness crept into its thoughts and it got all haywire and jumbled up. As long as it visualized another hiftia, nothing made very much sense but everything felt very, very good!

Finally, one day, through its far-seeing eyes, it saw what it had been searching for: It seemed to be another hiftia . . . there were little patches of brown on it . . . and some of it was white . . . but there wasn't much gray. There was a lot of blue, though. Were those curling, forking lines there? Were they down there somewhere, hidden by the floating skim of white?

Inside the hiftia, all the voices rose in a jumbled mumble: "A friend!" one would say. "But the colors are wrong! There is no gray!" another would whisper. "There's much brown! It *is* a friend!" "The white is everywhere! This isn't right!" "It *must* be a hiftia!" "It can't be!" "Wait!" "Forward!" "The colors are wrong!" "*It doesn't matter!*" And voice after voice after voice added to the din, till the hiftia rumbled like a purring lion.

But it went forward. It had been alone for eons. Even if this were wrong, even if there were something dreadfully wrong here, the price would be worth knowing that in all the universe, it was not alone.

It hurried closer to see if those lines were there, those beautiful lines. Already, shivers of delight bounced from core to surface to core until the hiftia pulsed with joy like a heart!

• • •

The Human

While the sun rose like a slow-motion explosion out of the Pacific and turned China rust-red, Steven Tiedeau lay propped against the side of his rented sailboat and scanned the harbor for any sign of Omiya. The previous afternoon, as he had lain napping in his hotel room, he had dreamed of her over and over — her hair like black liquid ice, her skin smooth as the quiet water of the harbor, and her minnow-shaped eyes. He awakened and knew that if she swam across the harbor again, he would somehow, however desperately or crudely, maneuver the boat over to her.

And at 7:05, out of nowhere, he saw her: fifty yards away, swimming toward him. He opened the picnic basket: inside was a thermos of coffee, a bottle of Riesling packed in ice, a salad, a selection of shrimp hors d'oeuvres, and half a dozen kinds of cheeses.

"Good morning," she said, hooking her arms over the side. Water ran down her face and dripped off her chin. She giggled when she saw him spreading the array of food across a small tray.

"I brought us a picnic," Steven said, "We can have ourselves some breakfast and talk, and then you can finish your swim." He glanced up at her. She watched him attentively. "But

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

after you eat, you won't feel like swimming, so I'll have to take you in. And with my sailing skills and no wind, that could take until one or two in the afternoon."

She slid back into the water, still holding onto the side of the boat with her hands. "I'm sorry," she said, "but I can't. You don't know me, and if you did — What is your name?"

"Steven. Please, I've been thinking about you constantly since yesterday. What could be so horrifying about you? It's the end of the world — we can be whatever we want to be in these days. Stay with me."

"Steven," she said, wiping the water from her eyes, "you look at me and you think you might like me, but if you knew me, if you looked closely at me, you would understand that it would be impossible. You would never want to see me again." She had been looking into his eyes, but now she stared at her hands. She had long fingers and perfect nails. "I have to go now," she said, exhaling.

"Omiya, don't go." He put his hands lightly around her wrists. "In a few weeks, we'll all be dead, so if I don't like you, if there's something dreadfully wrong between us, it'll be a short disappointment."

She smiled sadly, still looking at her hands.

"Please stay. Talk to me. Between loneliness and disappointment, I'll take disappointment. If it comes to that."

She suddenly pushed away from the boat and swam backward several yards. Her dark-nippled breasts floated near the surface. "Meet me tomorrow at the King Edward Garden — in the greenhouse restaurant at 9:00 A.M. I will try to tell you then."

He waved as she swam away.

Steven Tiedeau lay crossways in his boat and nibbled on a piece of Gruyère and drank the crisp Riesling and wondered why he had waited so long to find his own mermaid. Why had he waited until thirty-two days before the end of the world to drink Riesling and eat Gruyère and hold his nose up to the musky smell of China blowing across the harbor? Why couldn't he have done this years ago — years, years ago — instead of sitting at his expensive desk examining the ways in which the wealthy phrase their greed?

He felt a giggling madness creeping through his veins. This time, which would be the last time, he would do nothing halfway — he had been lonely long enough. What ever the price, it was unimaginable that it could be more than he had already paid. What could happen that would be worse than what was already going to happen in thirty-two days?

He lay in the rising sun and finished the wine and dozed and listened to the pattering of the waves against the side of the boat. He dreamed again of Omiya: her eyes, her hair, and the way she moved in the water. He felt

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rich. He felt alive.

The Alien

Primary Motivation: Desire
Energy Level: 78%
Libido Index: 695.0

Bedtime Story

I'm just about ready to turn on the inducer, Larrie. Give me your spaceship. Thank you. Now close your eyes and try to imagine this. Try to imagine the wonder of the hiftia when it drew nearer and nearer the blue and brown and white friend it had found! All the voices within it were loud and confused, but every once in a while, one would shout louder than the others: "Look for the lines! You must know for sure! Watch for the pattern!"

That was not so easy. Hiftias were supposed to have white tops and white bottoms, but this one seemed to have patches of fuzzy white all over it, sometimes in swirls, sometimes in crazy splotches, sometimes in rows of spots. And most puzzling of all, this hiftia seemed to be moving its fur from place to place at will. Those peculiar lines could be hiding anywhere.

But after having come so far and traveled so long, the hiftia was in no mood for failure. It had looked and looked, and now, if there was any chance at all, it would go for it. All the while, it felt like there were little live things crawling around all over it just underneath its skin — this is how a hiftia feels when it starts to fall in love. It could no longer imagine there was such a thing as sadness or grief or fear anywhere in the universe.

But there were sadness and grief and fear much closer than the hiftia would have believed. Down on the surface of that blue and brown and white sphere, there were people watching the sky and calculating when the hiftia would crash into it and kill everyone. They did not know that the hiftia was in love with their world. The people of Earth just thought they had had very bad luck one more time, and a big chunk of mindless rock was going to mindlessly kill them.

Meanwhile, the hiftia was studying what it thought would be its lover, and all the little voices were holding their breaths — at last, *there were the lines!*

They weren't quite like they were supposed to be, not quite like the images the voices had shown the hiftia . . . nevertheless, it felt its skin quivering and twitching, and knew that its search had come to an end. And much to the pleasure of the hiftia, its friend was undoubtedly playing a teasing game, probably just to be more enticing and enigmatic and exciting: It would let the approaching hiftia glimpse those thrilling curling lines, and then it would cover them up with white fluff and turn its face away — and then later it would momentarily pull aside the layer of white and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again show the lines.

Inside itself, the hiftia felt its balance shifting and twisting around, and sometimes it felt light and sometimes it felt heavy and sometimes it felt like it was completely crazy and might explode at any second.

Down on Earth, all its people fearfully watched the sky and waited for it to fall on them. The people of China were the least worried because it was there, on them, that the astronomers had calculated the rock would fall. They were without hope, and were content.

The Human

The King Edward Garden was an oasis in the center of the city, and in the center of the oasis was the gothic greenhouse where exotic species of plants from queer corners of the world grew in wild abundance. Steven Tiedeau selected a table near a cluster of white ginger lilies. On a mound to his right, each time a waiter hurried past, huge Mexican shell flowers bobbed their massive scarlet heads with an elephantine grace. Steven finished his second pink gin and inhaled the heavy scent of ginger from the cream-colored lilies.

"Hello." It was Omiya, coming around from behind him. He stood quickly, and suddenly realized that she was at least five-ten, nearly as tall as he. Before he could pull out her chair, she had already sat down. She moved like an eel though the air.

Pacing her elbows on the table edge, she rested her chin on her prayer-fixed fingertips. Omiya wore a black dress with a high, lacy collar. A few inches below her shoulder, on the left side, she wore a tiny blood-red ceramic rose.

"I heard today," she said," that the American scientists in Australia have measured that it will hit in north China between two and three in the afternoon on the twenty-second." She smiled sadly and shrugged her shoulders. "We can count the hours we have left now."

"It should be a good view from here," Steven said. As he stared at her, his past drained away like a long night's dream; those thirty years became thin and watery and insubstantial. His endless experiences of sweetness turning sour were no longer relevent. "Stay with me," he said. "Stay till the end." He reached across and took her hand. With the world standing on the edge of death, he felt no shyness at speaking the words that lay across his mind like a dusty, untended tapestry of loneliness and desire. "Stay with me. I don't want to be alone that day."

She hesitated and looked down at their touching hands.

"You have someone else to be with," he guessed.

"No," she said in a whisper. "Today I was going to tell you about me."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You don't have to," Steven said. "For the next few weeks, we can be whatever we seem to be." He looked at their hands. "We . . . everyone has that freedom now. I guess we always had it."

"Steven, if I were—" She looked away and caught her breath. "If I were as smart as I think I am, I would have a drink with you, shake your hand, and leave. You would be happier for it."

"And lonelier." Steven stopped a waiter, and they placed an order.

Omiya pulled her hands away from his and pushed back her hair. It was as black as her dress.

"When I was ten," she said, "I was bought by a man who was wealthy enough to have what he wanted. I don't remember my parents or growing up or being a child, because when I was fifteen, he had my memory removed." She smiled sadly. "I don't remember how it was done. I was born as the person I am now when I was fifteen."

The waiter set another pink gin before Steven, and a gin and tonic in front of Omiya.

"In a month," Steven said "none of us will have a future, and there won't be anyone to remember our pasts — so you don't have to tell me anything. You really don't."

"I want to tell you because. . . ."

"Because?"

She raised her thin eyebrows momentarily. Her lips pursed, and then she spoke. "At the end of the world, why not speak the truth. I want to tell you because I always hope that the person I tell will not dislike me." She took a breath. "The man who owned me was very kind as long as I did what he desired. He had much money and I had whatever I wanted. It wasn't a bad life. Before I can remember, he and I went to Europe and he bought the services of surgeons who changed me into the person he wanted. When I was just as he had stipulated, my memory was erased and I was born Omiya, age fifteen." She moved her hands so that they covered his; her fingers were long and perfect. "If you knew me well, I would frighten you."

"Whoever you are, whatever you are, I want you to stay with me till the end. I've seen enough of you to like that whatever else there is . . . it couldn't matter. With that thing in the sky coming at Earth, do you think anything about you could frighten me?"

"Yes. I do," she said, nodding. "Tomorrow I will swim across the harbor again. Meet me as you have before, and bring your picnic lunch. We will eat and talk, and you will decide that it will be the last time we will see each other. You will decide that you will prefer to be alone."

"No, I won't."

They gazed steadily at each other, and somewhere across the room came the sound of breaking glass.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Alien

Primary Motivation: Exuberant lust
Energy Level: 97%
Libido Index: 985 (preorgasmic)

Bedtime Story

Let go of the book, Larrie. There aren't any pictures, see? Just words. You have to imagine it — that's the whole idea. If you close your eyes, you can make up the pictures that go with the story, but you have to be quiet and close your eyes. Why? Because that's the way it's done, and because if you don't, I'm going to turn on the sleep inducer. O.K., now.

The closer the hiftia came to the object of its love, the louder the voices sang inside it. They sang like angelbirds in the strawberry gardens of the moon. It seemed to the hiftia that it was in the hands of some great power and that nothing could go wrong, nothing could fail to turn out exactly as it should. Once again, every thing felt just right.

And those little tickling prickles under its skin — they danced and ran and almost felt like they were patterns of fire burning everywhere across it. It was then that the hiftia realized that where its skin ached most was where it, too, had grown a peculiar pattern of forked and curling lines, a perfect mirror image of the pattern on the face of the loved one that floated there in space, so near, so near now, all veiled in white.

And finally, at last, as they came close enough that they could almost touch, the hiftia felt its craziness burst out in a hundred ways: its gravity bounced here and there and even seemed to fade away and then return, its velocity changed, and its voices sang music that could never be composed. The hiftia had come to the one that it loved, our Earth, and when they touched, the lines of the hiftia matched perfectly with the curving ramble of the Great Wall in China. The hiftia felt its life erupt out of itself, and just as it touched the one it loved, the one that would forever erase its illusion of awful loneliness, just for that moment, it felt itself die.

The Human

Steven watched her swim toward his boat with powerful, smooth strokes. Again, she wore only the small bottom part of her bikini.

What was it, he wondered, that had so strongly drawn him to her? Hormones? Her appearance? Having only thirty days to live? Having lived thirty years and never taking a chance, never saying *yes* unless God and odds were on his side?

She was close enough now so that he could see the small *o* of her mouth when she took a breath. She swam with her eyes shut.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He thought of her long, muscled legs, her breasts, her eyes and her skin, her skin like glass. But even if that were all different, if she were soft and flat-eyed, he liked what lay beneath her skin — the way she looked at him when she listened and when she spoke: she was completely *there.*

Near the boat, Omiya let her arms trail at her sides as she kicked with her feet together — then, with a sudden slick thrust, she was hanging on the edge of the boat again, streams of water running down her arms and pouring off her elbows. The boat thrashed under the pull of her weight.

"Did I frighten you?" she asked seriously.

Steven was taking a bottle of wine out of the picnic basket. "You may have bruised our lunch, but with that thing up in the sky, it would take more than a rocking boat to scare me. And more than you to scare me. But if you swam away now, I'd be frightened. And if I knew I was going to spend the next four weeks alone like I've spent the past ten years, I'd be frightened. I'd be scared now if I thought the end of the world would happen and I wouldn't care." Steven slouched back against the opposite side of the boat and grinned and folded his hands in his lap. "I've been practicing all morning to say that."

Omiya smiled without humor and then was grim-faced.

"But just because I practiced it doesn't mean it isn't true." He offered her his hand and she took it.

She pulled herself up, over the edge, her breasts swinging away from her chest. Her long legs slithered over the side. She pushed a towel under and sat with knees up, her legs slightly apart.

"Now you can see how I am different," she said. "And that in one way, I am like you." Her wet bikini bottom was nearly transparent.

Steven Tiedeau saw and could not speak.

"Do you want me to go?" Omiya asked softly.

His head swam. He couldn't think in words — there was only the speechless wonder of how she could be this way . . . a face so lovely, her long black hair lying wet across her breasts, the soft outward shell of her thighs . . . . And so it had happened again: something he thought was flawlessly wonderful turned into creepiness. The rose garden was carcinogenic. Beauty was the monster's epithelium. And truth was a candied emetic.

"Now you understand me," she said. "I was a boy when I was bought, and then most of me was changed. I can't remember being any other way than this." She started to move to the side again. "I'll go now."

So that was it. For all his thoughts of "inner beauty," he was going to choose now to let her go and spend the next thirty days thinking over all his years of training in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whom to love and how to love and what excuses could be made for loneliness.

"Wait," he said. "We can have a glass of wine, you can rest, and I can think." He handed her a towel to dry off with. "Why can't things be easy?"

"You'd know what you were, but you'd never find out what you could be."

"I might be better off not knowing."

"No," she said. "No, you wouldn't be."

As the sun rose higher in the sky and the mountains of China turned white and green, they ate sandwiches and drank malvasia bianca, and while they lay in the bottom of the boat, rocking on the small waves of the harbor Omiya pointed out a small white disk in the sky about a quarter of the size of the moon.

"That must be it," she said idly. "I wonder if it will hurt."

"It won't matter," he said.

The Alien

Primary Motivation: Rest
Energy Level: 2%
Libido Index: 0 ±.2

Bedtime Story

Sometimes, Larrie, at very special times, you can feel just what it's like to die, except you just feel it and it doesn't really happen. How do I know? Because every once in a while, Daddy and I show each other.

And that's how it was with the hiftia.

As it came down to Earth, its gravity changed in complicated ways and its speed went down to nothing, and these great big yellow *things*, kind of like octopus arms, came out of it, and they reached right down through all the atmosphere and hit like thunder right on the Great Wall of China; while overhead, filling up the sky, the great gray and brown hiftia hummed and pulsed, and everyone ōn Earth looked up at it and knew some awesome and wonderful thing was happening — they weren't dying, for one thing, and the seas and mountains were not being pulled off Earth, and in fact almost nothing happened. There was just a very deep humming with a kind of jingling sound mixed in with it. Some said it was like angels singing to the rumble of earthquakes. But then it was all over, and the hiftia pulled up its arms and moved slowly, slowly away, and in a few days, it had disappeared from the sky.

The hiftia didn't know what it had done — the craziness it had felt had grown so large and the joy it felt had got so big that it just did what hiftias were supposed to do to other hiftias — except it had made a small mistake and had done it to Earth. So the hiftia drifted away into the center of the Milky Way, where someday it will

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

awaken and wonder who it is and where it is and where it is supposed to do.

But in China, where the hiftia had touched the Great Wall, there was now a Great Ditch, dozens of meters deep, filled with a thick golden haze. The air in the Great Ditch was so thick it was almost like water, and when people came from all over the world to see it, they breathed in its golden, honey-smelling vapors and remembered how they thought they were going to die — and didn't — and how there were all kinds of things they had been wanting to do — and hadn't — and that was the beginning of the Ten Years of Happiness, when everyone was friends, and how the Great Wall of China became a river of honey and brought about those happy years.

Now, Larrie, tomorrow night, if you're good, I'll read — Larrie? Thank God.

The Human

The waiter brought their drinks, ceremoniously set them on linen napkins, and departed. The smell of ginger lilies drifted between them.

"What's in New Guinea?" she asked.

"I don't know. I think Joseph Conrad was there once. Maybe I'll work for a while and then move on. In the tropics a person can travel light."

"I think I'll try Europe again," she said.

There was silence between them. Through the restaurant there were giggles and laughter.

He gazed at his untouched drink. "It's a different world now. I have my second chance." He didn't realize he was shaking his head. "I'm sorry."

"We each had someone," she said. "The world was as good then as it is now — in a different way."

"It was."

"And then," Omiya said, putting her perfect fingers atop his hands, "we heard the angels singing."

"I never thought they'd sing for me."

"They sang for all of us."

"And now we need to say goodbye."

She was nodding. "Yes. We do."

They chatted over their drinks, then they stood and kissed and departed. The did not meet each other again, but they did not forget how one human being had met another, and in those last days, that had made them who they had wanted to become.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

F&SF T-Shirts in Two Colors

FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION

P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753

Send me _____ F&SF shirts at $6.50 each, enclosed.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Small ☐ Medium ☐ Large ☐ Extra Large ☐

☐ Red ☐ Navy

Add $1.00 for Canadian and foreign postage.

F&SF T-shirts make a great gift and are available only from this magazine at the bargain price of $6.50 each, which includes postage and handling. These handsome shirts come in navy blue with the original F&SF logo imprinted in white, or in red with blue imprinting. All sizes in stock and shipped as soon as we receive the coupon or a separate order.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There are some locations that are just not suitable for building a home no matter how ideal they may first appear. Perhaps there's a drainage problem, or contamination dangers, sometimes even rumors of ghostly troubles. "The Armistead House" isn't bothered by mundane problems such as these however. What troubles this house goes far beyond the ordinary ... and extraordinary.

The Armistead House

BY

W. S. DOXEY

It was Alice and Henry Armistead's dream house, for which they planned and saved all their married life.

When they brought me the rough plans, I saw it was much too large for a childless couple in their late forties. But my job as an architect is giving form and substance to just such dreams, so I said nothing. Their project also appealed to me for other reasons. They wanted twelve-foot ceilings and honest plaster walls. The site would be remote and rough. And Henry had some curious ideas about its construction.

Not that Alice and Henry were in any way strange. They had moved from New Jersey to our little town fifty miles west of Atlanta because labor problems and a sagging economy had made it necessary for Henry to relocate his small electronics company. They rented one of the condominiums I had built as a tax shelter for a group of local doctors. Within a few weeks, they had joined the country club and the Episcopal church, and Henry affiliated with the Rotary while Alice did volunteer work at the county hospital. Henry's plant provided a hundred new jobs. The pay was excellent, and due to the sophisticated nature of the work, many kids who'd studied computers in high school stayed on after graduation rather than moving away as they usually did. After six months the local paper did a two-page story about Alice and Henry, praising them for being solid citizens, even if by a quirk of fate they'd been born Yankee, she in the Catskills of New York, he in Pennsylvania Dutch country.

When Henry's business was at last running smoothly, they started looking for the right piece of land on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which to build their dream house. By this time we were friends and they had shared their plans with me, so I went along on more than one of their quests.

What they were looking for, they said, was wilderness — this in a region less than an hour from a metropolitan area. I tried to explain that while there were many wooded acres, they were relatively new because forty years ago the county was a sea of cotton. Falling prices and the boll weevil put an end to that, and land that wasn't maintained for pasture and cash crops was allowed to lie fallow. The wind sowed seeds as it would, and slash pines and brambles took over.

But they were undaunted. Smiling her little smile, Alice said, "There's still a piece of wilderness left. I can feel it in my blood."

And sure enough, the day came when they found it — or it found them, as the case may be. Six miles southwest of town were four hundred acres, more or less, of land so rocky and hilly that no one to any living person's knowledge had ever tried to run a plow through it. This was wilderness, all right, with giant trees growing among the trunks of ones larger still that had fallen God knew when. A bold stream flowed through it, over rocks flecked with mica that shone like gold in the fleeting sunlight. This triangular tract was all that remained of Blake's Hundred, a grant dating back to before statehood, when the territory of Georgia extended far west into Mississippi.

The land remained virgin because — as the old story goes — the lady was too ugly and too poor to attract a man. White men had hunted the hills for deer and bear, with no luck. Now a few ventured in from time to time. Legend had it that even the Indians avoided it, but no one knew why. There were rumors that one or two moonshiners had put the stream and the remoteness to good use; however, that was years before. Now it was as wild and forbidding as it must've been when Columbus set sail for the edge of the world.

Edgar Morgan held title to the four hundred acres by virtue of being related by marriage to the last of the Blakes. Family pride caused him to pay taxes year after year, but he considered the land to be his curse. Still, when I went to his office with Alice and Henry that day, he settled back in his old swivel chair and got as cunning as a mule trader, which he had been in his youth.

"Well," he said, "I don't reckon I can part with that prime acreage for less than two hundred thousand."

"That's five hundred dollars an acre!" I said. "Land on all sides is going for three."

Edgar licked his thin lips. "This is special land."

"Bad's not the same as special," I said, getting up to leave.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But Henry caught my sleeve. "Mr. Morgan," he said, "I'm willing to pay you four hundred dollars an acre, cash."

I started to jump in, but Alice gave me a glance and one of her sweet smiles that stopped me cold.

"Well," said Edgar, "I had my heart set on five, but seeing as it's you, and it's cash money — done!"

His meaty hand shot across the desk and grabbed Henry's like a rattler striking, and I knew what was going through the lump that passed for Edgar's mind: "Done skinned me a pair of Yankees at long last!"

What was done was done. They wanted a wilderness, and now they had one, for better or worse. Out on the sidewalk, they were as happy as two kids. I guess I was, too, in spite of Edgar Morgan, because now I had a place to build their dream house.

But dream houses and dreams are two different things. It wasn't difficult drawing plans from their rough sketches. The problem was that they kept adding little thises and thats. But they did so in a friendly way that told me, without words, that I was part of their dream, too.

Even though the house had a full basement, two floors, and a stand-up attic — not to mention a solarium, back porch and terrace, and a gazebo beyond — even though it was the biggest house I had undertaken up to that time, it wouldn't have taken fourteen months to build, if it hadn't been for the Armisteads' insisting that materials from the site be used in the construction, so far as possible.

This meant bringing in stone cutters from Tennessee to mine a cliff on the far side of the property for slabs for the kitchen and terrace. And since Alice and Henry wanted their wilderness spoiled as little as possible, the poor fellows — who weren't so poor after all their overtime — had to hand-carry the pieces to the house.

The bricks and flooring were something else. Henry said, "We want the bricks made from the clay excavated for the basement."

A team from Atlanta ran soil samples. Unfortunately — I thought — the clay was well-suited for that purpose. A professor at the junior college had studied the art, so we put together forms and a kiln and he set to work, fueling his fires with trees skidded in by mules from near the cliff.

The maples and oaks for the floors came from the outback, too. Jack Jameson and his boys set up their planing mill on the spot and did a fine job. But of course the planks had to be air-cured and fine-planed before we could nail them down.

Not everything was so difficult, though. I was able to find three honest-to-God plasterers in Atlanta, men who still knew the rare art of mixing mud and laying it on lovingly over lath. After the subfloors were in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and the brick reached the sills of the second floor, they went to work, and I spent many a spare minute, of which I had few, watching them do molding.

The house was six miles from town on a narrow road that ran nowhere, so we had to contract with the power company to run in a line, and we had to drill a well. The power line was costly but not troublesome. The well was both.

Bill Martin had drilled wells all over the county. So seldom did he have a dry hole that folks claimed he had the power to smell water. That, and the fact that he was bowed over, caused people to nickname him Camel. Bill's secret, which everyone knew and few really believed, was that he was a dowser, like his father and grandfather before him. I watched him that morning walk the land a hundred feet or so beyond the terrace, a freshly cut willow fork in his gnarled hands. I saw it suddenly dip so powerfully that Bill fell to his knees. It was like something huge yet unseen was trying to drag the willow and him into the earth.

The point of the willow actually stuck into the soil so that when Bill let go and fell back, the two prongs made a vertical Y. I asked if he was all right. He came to his feet and said, "By God, there must be a whole damn ocean down there!"

He set up his rig and went to work. About an hour later I heard a terrible screeching, and one of the carpenters yelled, "Would you look at that?"

Bill was on the ground again, flat on his back. The drill tower was bucking and twisting like a sapling in a windstorm. Smoke was pouring from the shaft leading into the earth. "Bucked him right off!" the carpenter said. "Just like a wild horse."

The wind was knocked out of Bill, nothing more. In a moment he recovered and switched off the drive motor. "Must've hit granite and seized up," he declared. But when he pulled the drill, he discovered that the metal bit was ground smooth as glass and was so hot that when he spit on it, it sizzled.

"Now don't that beat all," he said to me and all the workers who'd gathered around.

I asked him what had happened. He scratched his head. "I can't rightly say. Whatever's down there is hard as hell, though."

"How deep were you?"

"About seventy feet."

The others got back to work. Bill did some figuring on a piece of scrap paper, then moved his rig about ninety degrees to the east side of the house at the same distance and had another try.

Damned if the bit didn't seize up again! This time at fifty feet. He tried the north and west sides with the same results, the first at seventy feet, the last at about one hundred. He drilled slower, so he didn't ruin the bits, but he hadn't struck water, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the carpenters were kidding him good-naturedly about his failure, one of them saying it was probably a bad willow branch.

Bill dowsed away from the house, then, toward the creek. About three hundred feet from the terrace, he brought in a gusher of a well. The clear, cold water tested pure, so we were satisfied. But before leaving, Bill circled the house, looking at each of the four dry holes and shaking his head. When he sent me his bill, he charged only for the producing well, so he lost money on the job. Across the bottom of the bill he scrawled, "These folks will never have to worry about earthquakes!"

The Camel took a lot of pride in his work, so I guess that was his way of saying what happened wasn't his fault. But so far as I know, we've never had the slightest tremor in our county.

By May first the brick courtyard in front of the Armistead house was connected to the long circular drive that led in from the meandering country road that ran to town. From the road the only evidence that there was a house beyond was the pair of entrance gates made from the last of the basement bricks. Alice and Henry were there when the final brick was laid.

Everyone cheered and drank the champagne they'd brought. It reminded me of the launching of a ship, though there was nothing about their dream house to suggest it would float away. It was a solid brick structure with four chimneys and a mansard roof of zinc that, with time, would weather to the same shade of green as the leaves of the surrounding trees. Topping one chimney was a weather vane in the shape of a swan, which Henry had had made by a craftsman in the Pennsylvania Dutch country of his childhood. When I saw that swan moving back and forth in the shifting wind, I suddenly realized that during all the time of construction I hadn't seen a single bird, which was unusual because they usually make pests of themselves on a building site, fighting over scraps from the workmen's lunches. I hadn't seen a squirrel or a snake, either. But then this was wilderness, and I supposed that once Henry and Alice were settled, the animals would get used to them.

It took them about six weeks to furnish the house and move in. Around the middle of June, they invited half the town to a housewarming. It was one of those days that're sky-blue at dawn, cloudy at noon, and gray by four. The wine flowed, the music played, people came and went, and everyone was impressed, even me. True, I had been a part of their project since before the ground was broken, but a house — dream or otherwise — doesn't come to life until people live in it. Bob Gore and Fanny Short were there to write up the oc-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

casion for the newspaper. They took a lot of pictures, but they all came out fuzzy, due to the changing light, they later said. Still, the photos they printed were clear enough to show the county that the Armisteads' dream had come true.

The blessing of the house by Father Hallahan of the Episcopal church was the climax of the party. By this time the sky was the color of lead, though to the north and east it was still robin's-egg blue. A damp wind set the nearby trees to swaying like dancers, and there was the sour smell of impending rain. The priest dressed in his bright vestments went from room to room sprinkling water from a silver aspergillum as he intoned prayers for the health and good fortune of the occupants.

When Hallahan reached the attic, the storm broke in a sizzling bolt of lightning followed by a clap of thunder that shook the floors. Hail rattled on the roof and covered the lawn in a thin blanket. For a moment the priest's voice faltered and he was as wild-eyed as the rest of us. But then he smiled and said, "Nature's blessing." and finished his own.

Twenty minutes later the sun was shining, the hail melted. As we took our leave, I heard one lady say to Alice, "It's a marvelous house, but so far from town — and these woods." She shuddered. "I'd be terrified staying here during the day all alone. Aren't you?"

Alice smiled and shook her head. "I was raised in the mountains, and after living so close to New York City, this is like coming home."

And home it was. I came back from time to time to check on the things that every house, large and small, needs having done after the last brick is laid. Alice still did volunteer work at the hospital one day a week. The rest of her time she spent planting flowers and walking through the woods, "Just enjoying myself," she said. I saw Henry at Rotary meetings and on the golf course, but most of his spare time he was at home. "Living the good life," as he put it.

Then I got involved in a new condominium project and I didn't see either of them for a couple of months till I bumped into Henry at the grocery store. He was all smiles. "So what's the good news?" I asked. "Big profits this year?"

"Better than that!" he exclaimed, grabbing my arm. "Alice is expecting!"

"What?" I said. "Why, that's wonderful, but I thought—"

"That we couldn't have children? I know — that's what the doctors told us a long time ago. But she *is* pregnant, and Dr. Budge swears it's twins! We're making up for lost time."

I shook his hand and asked him when. "In March," he said, "so it must've happened the first two weeks we were in the house. It's sort of a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

miracle, isn't it? I mean, two dreams coming true like that, especially since we're not young."

I frowned at that remark.

"Hey," he said, "everything's fine! Doc Budge ran that amnio-whatever test. Michael and Martin are perfectly normal, and Alice is in great shape."

Michael and Martin? I thought, driving home. Henry Armistead was a real take-charge guy. But then he was happy. That was what counted.

By Christmas, though, Henry had changed. His happiness hadn't lessened, but he wasn't feeling well. He and Alice had me out for eggnog and to see the lovely way they had decorated the house for the holidays with pine boughs from the woods, and wild holly and mistletoe. Henry had found the perfect evergreen far away from the house. He cut it down, but when he tried to bring it home, he discovered he didn't have the strength. A couple of kids from his plant did the job and set it up in the foyer.

Henry had lost weight. His hair had been streaked with gray when he came to town, but now it was white. I knew he was my age, fifty, but he looked much older. His face was drawn and wrinkled. And as we toasted the season, I noticed that his hand trembled.

Alice was postively blooming. Her plump, rosy cheeks reminded me of a Madonna. "I've gained a little too much weight, but I feel wonderful!" she said, sitting next to Henry on the sofa before the fire and holding his hand in both of hers.

"I've never felt this good," she added, kissing his cheek.

Henry smiled. "I tell her it's the maternal instinct."

Laughing, she said, "And it's your paternal instinct that got me in this fix!"

They gave me a Christmas gift, a pair of fine gold cufflinks. As I said good-bye, snow was falling and the house looked as warm and cozy and comfortable as something in a dream. Henry saw me to my car. As I opened the door, I said, "I don't mean to intrude, but we are friends. Are you sick?"

In the pale light of the snow, Henry's face was wan. "I don't feel good," he said, "haven't for the past month. The local doctors ran all their tests and found nothing wrong. I'm going to the Emory hospital for a series after the first."

I laid my hand on his shoulder and was surprised by his frailty. I said, "If there's anything I can do . . ."

His lips trembled from the cold as he thanked me.

On January fourth I went to Charleston to bid on a job and got tied up in conference for two weeks. The day before I flew back to Atlanta, I remembered Henry and gave him a call. Alice answered, her voice childishly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

happy. When Henry came on the line, he didn't sound like himself, but then the connection was poor.

"Are you feeling better?" I asked.

"Not really. I'm plain tired all the time, but I can't sleep."

"The Emory tests?"

He sighed. "Inconclusive, the doctors said, which means they couldn't find anything wrong they could put a name to. My loss of weight mystified them. And now my hair is falling out. It's like I've aged ten years in a couple of months. One specialist thought it might be a hereditary condition, but I never heard of anyone in my family having it — whatever it is."

"Any pain?"

"No, thank God. But I just can't sleep. And the pills they prescribed don't work."

Though I hadn't suspected, Alice was listening on the extension. She gave a throaty laugh and said, "I tell him it's all in his mind! He thinks he's too old to be a father, so he's turning himself into a grandpa to ease his conscience!"

"Alice!" Henry said.

"Well, it's true — isn't it?"

"No, it's not, and I wish you could be more understanding."

"Temper, temper, Grandpa!" she said.

To me, Henry said, "Thanks for calling. It's nice to know someone's concerned."

"Don't you want to know about my condition?" Alice asked me.

"Why yes, how are you?" I asked.

"Fit as a fiddle and big as a house! I can't wait for the blessed event. Neither can Grandpa!"

I heard a click. Henry had hung up. Alice said, "Don't pay any attention to him. As soon as the twins are bouncing on his knee, he'll be back to normal. Bye-bye."

The babies were born on schedule, on one of those blustery blue days when the sky is peppered with puffy white clouds that craze the countryside with fleeting shadows. Michael squalled first. Martin was two ounces heavier at six pounds. Both were blond-haired and pink. Neither — it seemed to me as I peered at them through the glass of the nursery window, Henry by my side — looked like their parents. But then, I told myself, the newborn tend to resemble each other at first.

The Armisteads asked me to be their godfather. When the time came, I stood before the altar facing Father Hallahan and accepted the responsibility of their spiritual upbringing. During the small celebration that followed, Henry seemed in better spirits. But he looked worse. Except for a gray feathery fringe above his ears, he was bald. His neck seemed to have shrunk so that his shirt collar was pulled low by the weight of his tie, exposing his dry and wrinkled skin. After a single glass of champagne, he

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had to sit down, and when I spoke to him, his eyes avoided mine and his speech was halting.

Several weeks later he phoned me. Speaking in whispers, he said, "I must see you — now. Alice has taken the twins to the pediatrician. She'll be away for at least an hour."

"Do you need a doctor?" I asked.

"It's too late for that — will you come, *please*?"

The only sign of spring as I drove to the Armistead house was the bright yellow of wild daffodils here and there along the country roads. As I parked in the courtyard, I noticed that the house had weathered the winter and that the zinc roof was showing signs of the green patina that would mellow the gray metal and in time make the structure appear to be a living thing itself, thick-trunked and topped by leaves.

Henry answered my knock. The heavy door swung inward, and he stood in the half-light, slump-shouldered, his listless eyes looking upward into mine. For an instant I did not recognize him.

He must have read doubt in my expression, for, laughing without smiling, he said, "It's me — the father. I've got to show you something while there's still time — *if* there's still time."

I followed him down the basement stairs, moving as slowly as he, taking the steps one by one, pausing on each. As we crossed the floor to a storage room, I took his arm to steady him.

The door was secured with a padlock. As he fumbled with the key, I noticed that the hasp had been clumsily screwed into the wood with apparent disregard for the finely finished wood. It hung at an angle, and the facing was scratched and gouged. It was not the work of one of my carpenters.

Within the windowless room were two metal tables and a folding chair. The glass cover of the overhead light fixture had been removed and an adapter screwed into one of the sockets from which three or four insulated wires dangled like tentacles, or like vines from a branch. On the tables were instruments of some kind, pads of paper, pencils, and a tape recorder.

Henry bolted the door behind me. "Now we can talk," he said.

The tone of his voice, the look on his wizened face, chilled me. "Why the secrecy?" I asked.

"Alice doesn't approve. She thinks I'm crazy." He licked his shrunken lips. "Maybe I am. I hope so."

Though his appearance had changed, he was still Henry Armistead, my good friend. "You're not feeling well," I said. "But there's nothing wrong with your mind."

"Hear me out before you decide."

"Of course, but I know—"

"I'm no longer sure anything can be known." He gestured toward the tables. "Those are electronic detectors."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't understand."

"Nor do I. But I suspect, *suspect* that there's something very wrong with this house."

"But I know this house, inside out."

"Look at me," he said. "My hair has fallen out; I've lost sixty pounds; my skin is dry, wrinkled — yet the doctors insist I'm not sick."

"True, but a house is only a structure. How—"

"At first I suspected radiation sickness," he said. "There have been cases caused by buildings made from contaminated materials — bricks from clay taken from pits near chemical dumps, for example."

"Henry, the bricks in this house are made from the clay we excavated for this basement."

"I know — and my counters haven't detected anything more than background radiation."

"Well?"

"Microwaves are dangerous, too. I thought the house might be in the path between two relay towers."

"But there aren't any towers — this is wilderness."

"Yes, but it's possible they're being deflected in some way. However, the equipment says no."

"In that case—"

"Then I considered a magnetic field. And I found one — underneath the house. But it's relatively weak — on the order of, say, iron ore."

I recalled the difficulty Bill Martin had had drilling for water, the strange action of his dowsing willow. But the Armistead property was no more than five miles from the Alabama state line, beyond which iron was mined, so I said nothing.

Henry held up his gnarled hands and said, "But look at me! I've become an old man in less than a year! Something is happening!"

What he said was obvious. But there was something else just as obvious, and therefore very strange. I said, "If so, Alice and the twins haven't been affected."

He fixed me with a chilling stare. "Alice has changed, too."

"She's the picture of health!"

"Physically, yes. But she's different. Her eyes, her voice. I've known her thirty years, and she's not the same woman."

"Look," I said, "so much has happened to you in such a short time. First the move from New Jersey; then this house; and now the twins."

"The twins are different, too."

"What?"

His eyes shifted about the room as though he feared he was being observed. He leaned toward me and whispered, "They can talk."

"Talk? They're barely two months old!"

"They speak only to Alice, not to me. I have proof."

Although Henry was a shadow of his former self, the look in his eye scared me. "Why don't we go upstairs

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and have a cup of coffee?" I suggested.

"And order me a straitjacket? Listen to this before you make up your mind."

He pressed the *play* button of the recorder and turned up the volume.

For ten seconds or so, there was only the buzz of blank tape running. Then there was a click of a door opening and the sound of footsteps.

"Alice," he said, "in the bathroom."

Two smaller voices, high-pitched, said "Bath time."

Alice laughed and said, "Such good boys!"

"Such good boys."

"Mama loves her good boys. Do you love your mama?"

"We love you, Mama."

Henry turned off the tape. "I made that two days ago," he said. "Yes, I bugged my own house, my own family. But" — he caught my hand — "but I don't believe those kids are mine!"

To say I was stunned by what I'd heard would be a gross understatement. Surely it was a trick. And now this. I managed to say, "Alice would never—"

Henry nodded. "I know. She wouldn't."

"Then—"

Before he could reply, we heard the hasp on the outside of the door slam shut, and Alice said, "Spying — both of you? Naughty, naughty! For this you'll get no supper!"

And I swear that I heard an echo, two faint voices saying, "No supper."

Henry beat on the door, said, "Alice, be civil!"

"Naughty boys are always punished," she said.

And again that echo!

"Unless they say they're sorry and promise to be very good."

Henry pressed his cheek against the door. "All right. We promise."

"Promise what?"

"We'll be very good. Now let us out."

"Say please."

"Please."

"Both of you."

"Please," we said.

She swung the hasp. Henry slipped the bolt and slowly opened the door.

Alice greeted us with a radiant smile, her hands on her hips. Michael and Martin were at her feet, staring at us with unblinking sky-blue eyes.

I did what a friend should, what I would've wanted Henry to do for me, had our roles been reversed.

I had him removed from the house and taken to a psychiatric hospital for observation. Not that I believed he was insane. He was confused, and it seemed to me that his physical and mental conditions were directly related.

Alice was very helpful. The concern she showed for her husband was so sincere that I was convinced Henry had deluded himself about her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

changing. More than once I held the twins in my arms. They gurgled and cooed like the perfectly normal baby boys they were.

Henry's place in the company was taken by Alice, and she did an admirable job meeting the deadlines and so forth of a government contract that had ten months more to run, as well as successfully bidding a new contract that led to an expansion of the plant and an additional seventy-five jobs. She came to the office every morning early, the twins with her. While she worked at her desk, they played quietly on the carpet with toys and pieces of electronic gear that the factory produced.

Every Sunday afternoon they drove to Atlanta to visit Henry. Sometimes I went along. Henry's condition deteriorated rapidly. After a month he went into a coma. A week later he was on a life-support system. Not long afterward, when brain scans revealed no mental activity. Alice gave her consent and he died. The autopsy reported cause of death as advanced old age.

I didn't try to fill Henry's shoes. Since I was the twin's godfather, however, I did feel responsible for them. So I dropped by the factory and the house when I could. I was at their first and second birthdays, too — just the four of us celebrated. I remember asking Alice why she didn't send the boys to nursery school so they could have playmates. She flashed that little smile of hers and said, "Michael, Martin — he doesn't really mean that. He knows that you have me."

Due to out-of-town business, I missed their third birthday. But I had presents for them. So I drove straight to the house from the airport and arrived unexpected just as the sun was setting behind the tall trees. The March wind was blowing and the woods were swirling in shadows as I passed through the gate.

I know that what I saw in the courtyard was due to the poor light. But still, when I close my eyes and visualize my memory of it . . .

The twins were romping around, playing tag or some game they'd made up, as kids do. Suddenly, one leaped on the other's back, and for a moment it seemed that the two became one, that instead of a pair of blond, three-year-olds, there was a single child, taller, larger.

I blew the horn, waved. The child turned toward me, his eyes flashing so brightly that I blinked. When I looked again, Michael and Martin were standing side by side, holding hands.

After they opened their gifts and were playing with them in the study, Alice and I went to the kitchen for coffee. I mentioned I had seen them in the courtyard. Her eyes narrowed. But then she smiled and said, "They're very creative. Living here in the wilderness with me, they have to be."

"Yes, the wilderness," I said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Aren't you afraid of animals, of snakes?"

"I haven't seen any to speak of — only a crow now and then."

Her voice seemed different, as though she were exhausted. "Aren't you feeling well?" I asked.

Her fingers brushed a strand of graying hair from her brow as she replied, "I'm a little tired, that's all. Business, you know."

"Plus trying to be both father and mother. Why not hire a woman to look after the boys?"

"I'd never do that," she replied. "We're happy the way we are. And they're no trouble, really. Most of the time they entertain themselves, and they can read."

"Picture books?"

"Oh, no — anything. When they find a word they don't know, they look it up in the dictionary."

"Alice," I said, "they're just three years old!"

"A bright three, very bright. They're so remarkable that sometimes I wonder how I can be their mother. But I am. They're such a blessing."

As she spoke, her hand holding the coffee cup trembled slightly, and I noticed her fingernails were ragged, as though she had been biting them.

For the next several months, I spent as much time as I could with Alice and the twins. The four of us went to Six Flags amusement park one Sunday afternoon. Nothing would do but Michael and Martin had to ride every twisting and turning ride. By the end of the day, I had that green feeling of seasickness. They, however, like all kids, were as bouncy as when they arrived.

Then it so happened that business called me out of town for six weeks. I spoke to Alice a few times on the phone, and again I noticed that hint of fatigue in her voice. But no, she assured me, she was fine.

When I at last returned, though, I found her to be changed. She had dyed her hair, but it did not seem as thick as I remembered it. Her face showed wrinkles around the eyes and mouth. And she was thinner.

I said nothing about her appearance, but she offhandedly remarked that business was down, that she was having trouble with a government bid. A day or two later, while playing golf with Clay Whitmore, her CPA, I asked if there was any truth to the rumor that some local companies would soon be laying off workers.

"One or two might," he said, "but not Armistead Electronic. They should be expanding their plant. That Alice is some wheeler-dealer."

"Is she working too hard?" I asked.

"Probably," Clay said. "But what's she got now that Henry's gone besides the company, the twins, and that dream house of hers? Hey — you aren't considering matrimony at your age?"

Marriage was the farthest thing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from my mind. It's strange, perhaps, but I always felt that building homes for people made me part of their families, and while there were women in my life, my work was what satisified me.

I laughed at Clay's suggestion and said, "This dog is too old for new tricks. I'm the twin's godfather, and it seemed to me that Alice hasn't been looking well lately."

"Hell," said Clay, "what is she, fifty-three, fifty-four? She's getting old, just like the rest of us!"

Yes, she was getting old. And as the months passed, she grew older, just as Henry had. By Christmas she was using a cane. When I came to the house bearing gifts, we sipped eggnog and talked, while Michael and Martin built a snowman on the terrace.

Small talk at first — about the Christmas tree the twins had cut and set up, about her being chosen Citizen of the Year the month before. Then she touched my hand and said, "It's happening to me — what happened to Henry."

"I know. Have you seen a doctor?"

"Four — specialists in Atlanta."

"And?"

"They don't know. One suspects that something's wrong with the genes that control aging, that they've been speeded up. My condition reminded him of progeria. It's a rare disease that causes children to age ninety years in ten."

She brushed a tear from her cheek. "I wish I had been kinder to Henry. How he must've suffered!"

"Don't blame yourself — you didn't know."

"But I *did* know! I just didn't seem to care."

"You had the twins to think of."

She nodded. "I still do. What will happen to them when I die?"

Before I could reply and comfort her the best way I could, there was a tap on the window.

We glanced over and saw Michael and Martin staring at us. Through the double-pane glass, their eyes seemed to twinkle like stars. On the terrace behind them stood a shape made of fresh snow, a marvelous sculpture of themselves, the two as one.

At 2:30 A.M., three days before the twins' fourth birthday, my telephone awakened me from a dreamless sleep.

"I need you — now!" a voice whispered.

In my drowsiness it took me a moment to realize it was Alice Armistead.

"Now!" she repeated. "I need help, *now!*"

"Alice, what is it?"

"One of the boys has disappeared, and the other . . . Come quickly!"

I was out of bed now, slipping on my clothes. "Yes — but what's happened?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"They've been in the basement, in that storage room Henry used."

"Doing what?"

"I don't know — they keep the door locked."

"But you said one—"

"I hid and watched, and only one came out. Only . . ."

"What?"

"He's larger — he's as big as I am. I asked him where his brother was — and — and—"

"What did he say? Tell me."

"Nothing — he said nothing. He looked at me and his eyes were blank, as if he were sleepwalking, as if I didn't exist, as if I weren't even there!"

I was pulling on a pair of loafers now. "Did you try to waken him?"

"He wasn't asleep — if was as if he were, but he wasn't! I caught his sleeve, and he removed my hand and picked me up as if I weighed nothing! I never dreamed they were so strong!"

"He picked you up and—?"

"Laid me on the sofa and covered me with a blanket, that's all. Then he went upstairs. I looked in the storage room. There's a lot of electronic equipment I've never seen before — and there's something else!"

I found my car keys. "What?"

"A hole through the floor! Like a tunnel slanting down — I don't know how deep. The sides are smooth like glass. There's not a speck of dirt on the floor around it! Are you coming? *Please!*"

"I'm on my way. Where are you?"

"In my room."

"Lock the door. Don't move till I get there."

"I—"

The phone went dead.

The night sky was ablaze with stars. A pale crescent of a moon touched the horizon to the west. I drove the narrow, twisting road as fast as I dared, the lights of my car casting shadows from the pressing trees that seemed to pluck at me like grotesque fingers as I passed.

What would I do — what *could* I do — when I arrived? Get Alice out of the house, yes. Then and only then I'd worry about the boys. Or the boy? "One — as big as I," she'd said. I shuddered at the memory of what I'd seen in the courtyard. Surely my eyes had deceived me then, as hers were deceiving her now. She was ill, as Henry had been. He had heard voices. But I had heard them, too, or thought I had.

I felt my hands shake as I gripped the wheel. I was an engineer, I told myself. I dealt with facts, with solids and spaces that could be measured and shaped. Not with flights of fancy. The strange always had a logical explanation, once it was known. So fear was childish. The twins? Precocious children. But as an architect I also dealt with beauty, which was feeling and could not be measured and weighed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

My heart was pounding as I came around the wooded curve and saw the gates. The lights were on, and as I turned into the drive, I saw more lights through the trees.

Every light in the house was on. The structure was like a huge glowing lamp.

I stopped in the drive and got out of the car.

The front door opened. Alice stood in the space, silhouetted by the blazing light.

"Can you feel it?" she screamed.

The earth was trembling, rocking gently, moving.

"Come out!" I cried.

"The twins — I can't find them!"

I started toward her. Then the earth tilted and flung me facedown. As I came to my feet and called her name, the house pulsed with a light so intense that I saw through the brick and boards. The beams and joists were revealed like bones on an X ray, and Alice disappeared.

Now the earth shook and groaned. Huge trees swayed and fell away from the house. The ground rose in front of me, the bricks of the courtyard sprang loose from their cement and flew into the air.

As the earth tilted more and more, I slid down this incline away from the house. When my feet stopped against a tree trunk and I looked up, the house was gone and something, something rose above the place it had stood — something huge, burning with an incandescent silver-blue light so powerful that when I shielded my eyes with my hands, I still could see it through my own flesh!

It hovered for a moment, though it seemed an eternity, and then it rose, gathered speed, and vanished.

I retreated into the woods and hid myself, from what I did not know. At dawn I made my way through the blasted trees and torn earth and looked down at where the Armistead's dream house had been.

There was only a crater, perhaps two hundred feet in diameter, half-filled with water. The sides were as smooth as glass. How deep it was I could not tell.

The government investigators who came and cordoned off the site questioned me for hours. I told them what I knew, about Alice and Henry and their children, about the construction of the house. I explained that Alice had called me because she felt the earth shake and feared for the safety of the twins and her. I was honest — I told them about the intense light rising out of the ground.

They tested for radiation but found the level to be normal. They ran many other tests, too. But they didn't share the results with me. When they packed up their equipment and left three days later, they told me that the smooth sides of the crater indicated igneous activity. There must've been a freakish volcanic blowout — very

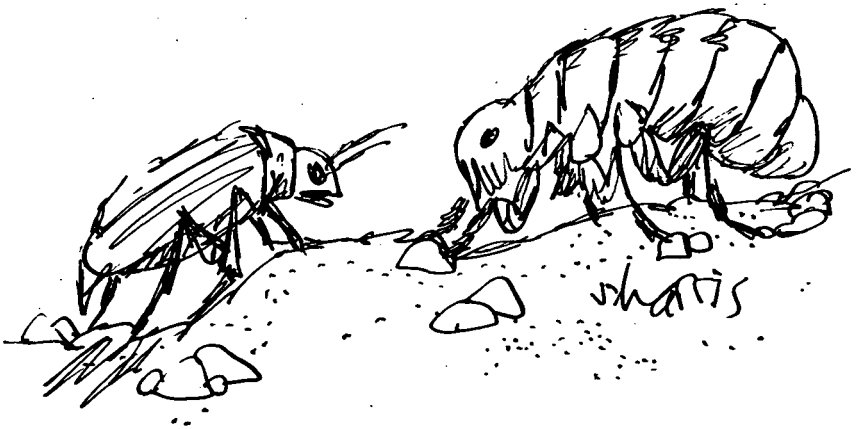
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rare, but not unknown.

The media reported their conclusion to the public. Everyone accepted it and went about their business, even me. Any other explanation was just too fantastic for a normal mind to consider for very long. And we're all pretty normal in our little town.

Still, when the Armisteads' estate was settled and it was learned they had no heirs, I acted on impulse and bought their wilderness for taxes. A sentimental gesture, I suppose. They were my good friends. And I shared their dream.

I drive out to the property two or three times a year and walk around. The crater has completely filled to become a sparkling pond. New trees have sprouted. Birds and squirrels seem to have discovered the place at last, and this fall I saw deer tracks. In the future, people with dreams like Alice and Henry had may settle the wilderness. Time, like nature, heals all. But I doubt I'll live long enough to see it come to pass.



"Public Relations has nothing to do with it. We're not cute and cuddley, and that's that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Installment 11: *In Which Nothing Terribly Profound Occurs*

Let's see, now. Didn't I promise to say a few words about 2010 (MGM)? That was a while ago. Put on the side-counter warmer till I'd wrung myself dry in re *Dune,* by way of explanation. Seems somehow moot now. But, as I said I'd say, I'll say so now.

2010 is a great deal smarter and high-minded than the first reviews would have had you believe. For instance, a critic named Michael Ventura appraised the film in the *L.A. Weekly* under the headline "2010: A Comic Book is Not a Poem". He didn't consign the movie to hell, but he said it wasn't the lyric icon Kubrick gave us; said he had trouble remembering the sequence of scenes; said it was devoid of that quality we might call "divine." Well, that's true.

And granted that once you get beyond the mystical trappings the plot is considerably thinner than *2001* (with which *2010* has been, and perhaps should be, inevitably compared), and the "philosophy" is homespun, it nonetheless seems to me that the most salient praise one can direct toward *2010* is that the film has a brain. It is *about* something.

In a year redolent with smarm — the clone grotesqueries of the sexually-corrupt *Hardbodies* and *Risky Business's* ethically bankrupt popularity with filmgoers of all ages — a movie that attempts to say the universe does

Copyright © 1985 by The Kilimanjaro Corporation.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

still contain wonders and intellectual uplift must be treasured. That ain't, as we say in the world of comestibles, chopped liver (a food of my people).

As one who has gone on record at obnoxious length about the inadequacies of director Peter Hyams, I hear the furgle of your eyebrows lifting when I report that if there be substantive inadequacies in *2010*, they cannot be levied against Hyams. He has directed with cool composure and high craft. And as one who has been friend to Arthur Clarke for more than thirty years, again I perceive furgling at my belief that the things-wrong with this film stem directly from Arthur's novel, a book I suggest never should have been written.

Ask Budrys to deal with that aspect of the matter. He's the book evaluator; I'm just the joe who goes blind sitting in dark rooms on your behalf.

For me, a sequel to something as remarkable as *2001* must not only answer the cosmic questions joyously left unanswered in the original, it must take me into equally as extrapolative places. *2010* attempts the former, and I'd rather have been left with my own suppositions. What was proffered as solution to the puzzle seemed rinkytink, commonplace, unmemorable.

Yet feeling the oppression of the sequel's inadequacies is very likely because one has the unrelenting drive to believe that all this massive machinery — $27 million in production and another $24 million for prints and advertising? that's what I think it was — must have been set in motion for some Deep Purpose; and when the payoff comes, the flashing lights and terraforming scintillate not in the glare of the memory of that star child floating toward Earth at the conclusion of *A Space Odyssey*.

There are nice, subtle, futuristic touches that the alert viewer remembers — one player's tie, collar and watch — Arthur feeding the pigeons from a park bench — but one comes away from *2010* with two impressions:

First, that it is a peculiarly earthbound film, returning from the wonder and mystery of that ebon slab floating in space to the mundane (by comparison) concerns of loved ones left behind, and terrestrial political squabbles. Literally, a bringdown.

Second, that Peter Hyams pulled off something of a small miracle. Given the book as basis, a story at best mildly innervating; and given the necessity to make the movie based solely on the Everest Principle ("because it's there"); and given that MGM's then-chief operating officer Frank Yablans needed a major vehicle to save his ass at the studio so the film was rushed into production; and given that Hyams at his top-point efficiency isn't Kubrick after a sleepless week; and given that expectations of those who deify *2001* can never be fulfilled; it is something of a small

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

miracle that *2010* is as intelligent, as inventive, as handsome as it is.

That it makes sense at all, given the above, is much to the director's credit. It earns him respect and a stay on the note of foreclosure that has haunted his previous films.

As of March 10th, *2010* had earned $40,700,000 in domestic boxoffice, with foreign and ancillary monies yet to come. It was a coup for Hyams. But it didn't save Yablans. Moneyman Kirk Kerkorian was "impatient" with the results and, as of March 13th, Frank Yablans (and later his entire cadre) was fired from MGM/UA Entertainment as President and Chief Operating Officer of MGM Films. And we just might lament that there ain't no justice; but with that slash of the scimitar of retribution heard by the drunk driver who doesn't get nabbed the first fifty times he runs a stop sign and takes a fall on the single occasion he's innocent of wrongdoing, the ever-watchful universe caught up with Frank Yablans for such offenses to the tender sensibilities of filmgoers as *Monsignor*.

Justice: swift and sure.

But *2010* is left to us as merely another movie that didn't quite make it.

ANCILLARY MATTER: Though my mandate in these essays is serviceable only when dealing with motion pictures (though one tv column will soon manifest itself for good and sufficient), I risk your wrath with advisement of an item usually beyond my purview, by use of the specious logic that it is *visual* in nature, and thus can be fudged into this space.

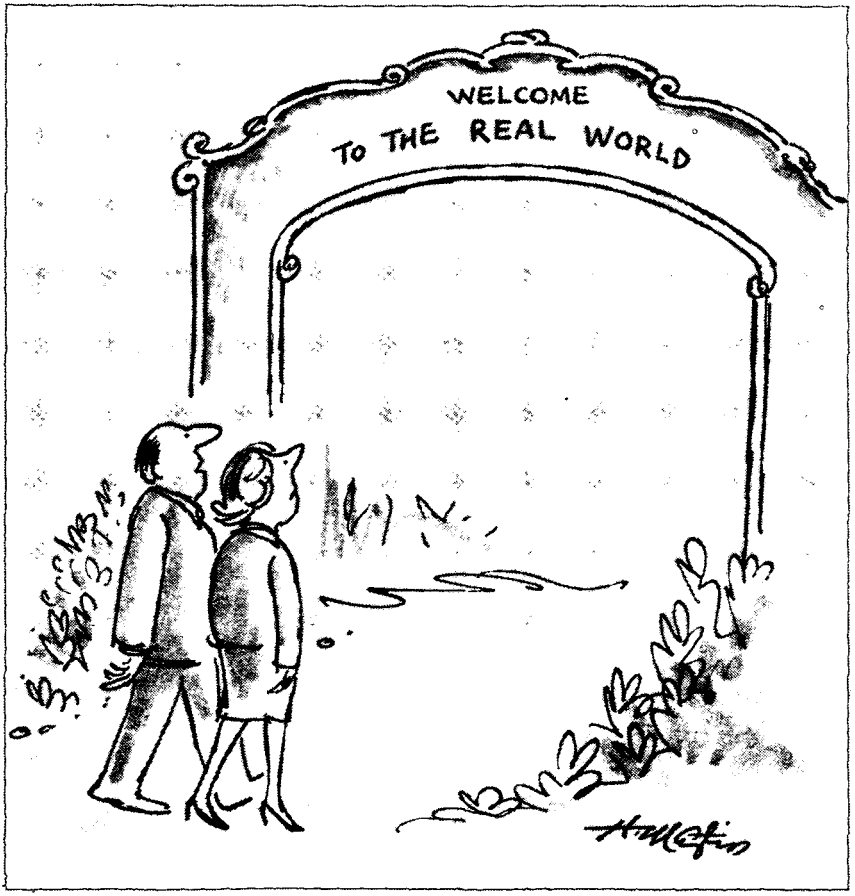
It is the latest book to be illustrated by the man his publisher calls "one of the foremost wood engravers in the United States." This is disingenuousness on the part of The University of California Press, because Barry Moser is to wood engravers as Lenny Bruce was to comedians, as Brother Theodore is to monologists, as Poe was to writers. If you have not seen his Pennyroyal Editions of MOBY-DICK (1981), ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND and THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS (1982 & 1983) or HUCKLEBERRY FINN (1984), yours is an empty life, devoid of beauty or meaning.

Barry Moser's illustrations are exquisite beyond the telling. He soars at an altitude where only such wondrous birds of passage as Lynd Ward and Rockwell Kent have tasted the wind. The passion, craft and imagination of Moser's work have an impact that leaves the viewer speechless.

Thus, it is a visual event of considerable importance when Barry Moser illustrates Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN. Again in a Pennyroyal Edition designed by the artist, this 255 page large-size (8½"x 12") interpretation of the 1818 text

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is the best $29.50 you will spend this year. Fifty-two chilling and unforgettable illustrations in black and white and duotone. A book you must not deny yourself. Such art as this is surely the reason we were given eyes.



"Where do you suppose we've been all our lives?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

What is Jane Yolen up to? Her recent novel, CARDS OF GRIEF, has received several award nominations. A new Commander Toad children's book has just been published. DRAGON'S BLOOD, an earlier novel, will soon be on CBS as part of their Storybreak program. Ace is about to publish DRAGONFIELD & OTHER STORIES, which is book #77. And here we offer her latest story, which will be included in a collection called MERLIN'S BOOKE, to be published in early 1986.

The Dragon's Boy

BY
JANE YOLEN

It was a day in early spring, with the clouds scudding across a gray sky, that the boy found the cave. He had been chasing after Lord Ector's brachet hound, the one who always slipped her chain to go after hare. She had slipped him as well, leaving him lost in the boggy wasteland north of the castle walls. He had crossed and recrossed a small meandering stream following her, wading thigh-deep in water that — he was painfully aware of it — would come up only to the other boys' knees. The reminder of his height only made him crankier.

The sun was high, his stomach empty, and the brachet had quit baying an hour earlier. She was no doubt back at the kennel yard slopping up her food. But she was his responsibility, and he had to stay out until he was sure. Besides, he was lost. Well, not exactly, but *botbered* a bit, which was a phrase he had picked up from the master of hounds, a whey-colored man for all that he was out-of-doors most of the day.

The boy looked around for a place to get out of the noon sun, for the low, hummocky swamp with its brown pools and quaking masses offered little shelter. And then he saw a small tor mounding up over the bog. He decided to climb it a bit to see if he could find a place where he might shelter, maybe even survey the land. He'd never been quite this far from the castle on his own before, and certainly had never come out into the northern fens, where the peat-hags reigned, and he needed time to think about the way home. And the brachet. If the mound had been higher, he wouldn't have attempted it. The High Tor, the really large mound northwest of the manor, had somewhat of an evil reputation. But this hillock was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hardly that. He needed to get his bearings and sight the castle walls or at least a tower.

He was halfway up the tor when he saw the cave.

It was only an unprepossessing black hole in the rock, as round as if it had been carved and then smoothed by a master hand. He stepped in, being careful of the long, spearlike hanging rocks, and let his eyes get used to the dark. Only then did he hear the breathing. It was not very loud, but it was steady and rumbling, with an occasional *pop!* that served as punctuation.

He held his breath and began to back out of the cave, hit his head on something that rang in twenty different tones, and said a minor curse under his breath.

"Staaaaaaaaaay," came a low command.

He stopped. And so, for a stuttering moment, did his heart.

"Whooooooooooo are you?" It was less an echo bouncing off cave walls than an elongated sigh.

The boy bit his lip and answered in a voice that broke several times in odd places. "I am nobody. Just Artos. A fosterling from the castle." Then he added hastily, "Sir."

A low mumbling sound, more like a snore than a sentence, was all that was returned to him. It was that homey sound that freed him of his terror long enough to ask, "And who are you?" He hesitated "Sir."

Something creaked. There was a strange clanking. Then the voice, augmented almost tenfold, boomed at him, "I am the Great Riddler. I am the Master of Wisdom. I am the Word and I am the Light. I Was and Am and Will Be."

Artos nearly fainted from the noise. He put his right hand before him as if to hold back the sound. When the echoes had ended, he said in a quiet little voice, "Are you a hermit, sir? An anchorite? Are you a druid? A penitent knight?"

The great whisper that answered him came in a rush of wind. "I am the Dragon."

"Oh," said Artos.

"Is that all you can say?" asked the dragon. "I tell you I am the Dragon, and all you can answer is *oh*?"

The boy was silent.

The great breathy voice sighed. "Sit down, boy. It has been a long time since I have had company in my cave. A long time and a lonely time."

"But . . . but . . . but." It was not a good beginning.

"No *but*," said the dragon.

"But. . . ." Artos began again, needing greatly to uphold his end of the conversation.

"Shush, boy, and listen. I will pay for your visit."

The boy sat. It was not greed that stayed him; he was comforted by the thought that he was not to be eaten.

"So Artos, how would you like your payment? In gold, in jewels, or in wisdom?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A sudden flame from the center of the cave lit up the interior, and, for the first time, Artos could see that there were jewels scattered about the floor as thick as pebbles. But dragons were known to be great games players. Cunning, like an old habit, claimed the boy. Like most small people, he had a genius for escape. "Wisdom, sir," he said.

Another bright flame spouted from the cave center. "An excellent choice," said the drageon."I've been needing a boy just your age to pass my wisdom on to. So listen well."

Artos did not move and hoped that the dragon would see by his attitude that he was listening.

"My word of wisdom for the day is this: *Old dragons, like old thorns, can still prick.* And I am a very old dragon. Take care."

"Yes, sir," said Artos, thinking but not saying that it was a bit of wit often spoken on the streets of the village nestled inside the castle walls. But the warning by the villagers was of priests and thorns, not dragons. Aloud he said, "I will remember. Sir."

"Go now," said the dragon. "And as a reward for being such a good listener, you may take that small jewel. There." The strange clanking that Artos had heard before accompanied the extension of a gigantic foot with four enormous toes, three in the front and one in the back. It scrabbled along the cave floor, then stopped not far from Artos. Then the nail from the center toe extended peculiarly and tapped on a red jewel the size of a leek bulb.

Artos moved cautiously toward the jewel and the claw. Hesitating a moment, he suddenly leaned over and grabbed up the jewel. Then he scuttered back to the cave entrance.

"I will expect you tomorrow," said the dragon. "You will come during your time off."

"How did you know I had time off?" asked Artos.

"When you have become as wise as a dragon, you will know these things."

Artos sighed.

"There is a quick path from the back bridge. Discover it. And you will bring me stew. With *meat*!" The nail was suddenly sheathed and, quite rapidly, the foot was withdrawn back into the dark center of the cave.

"Tomorrow," promised the boy, not meaning a word of it.

The next morning at the smithy, caught in the middle of a quarrel between Old Linn the Apothecary and Magnus Pieter the Swordmaker, Artos was reminded of his promise. He had not forgotten the dragon — indeed, the memory of the the great clanking scales, the giant claw, the shaft of searing breath, the horrendous whisper had haunted his dreams. But he had quite conveniently forgotten his promise, or shunted it aside, or buried

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it behind layers of caution, until the argument had broken out.

"But there is never any *meat* in my gravy," whined Old Linn.

"Nor any meat in your manner," replied the brawny smith. "Nor were you meet for battle." The smith rather fancied himself a wordsman as well as a swordsman. And until Old Linn had had a fit, falling face first into his soup in the middle of entertaining the visiting high king, the smith had been spitted regularly by Old Linn's quick tongue. Now Linn was too slow for such ragging, and he never told tales after meals anymore. It was said he had lost the heart for it after his teeth had left prints on the table. But he was kept on at the castle because Lord Ector had a soft heart and a long memory. And because — so backstair gossip had it — Linn had a cupboard full of strange herbs locked up behind doors covered with deep carved runes.

Artos, who had been at the smithy to try and purchase a sword with his red jewel, was caught with his bargaining only just begun. He had not even had time to show the gem to Magnus Pieter when Old Linn had shambled in and, without any prelude, started his whining litany. His complaints were always laid at the smith's door. No one else in the castle was as old as the pair of them. They were best of friends by their long and rancorous association.

"My straw is ne'er changed but once a sennight," Linn complained. "My slops are ne'er emptied. I am given the dregs of the wine to drink. And now I must sit, if I am to be welcomed at all, well below the salt."

The smith smiled and returned to tapping on his piece of steel. He had stopped when Artos had begun his inquiries. In time to the beat of the hammer, he said, "But you have straw, though you no longer earn it. And a pot for your slops, which you can empty yourself. You have wine, even though you ne'er pay for it. And even below the salt, there is gravy in your bowl."

That was when Old Linn had whined piteously, "But there is never any *meat* in my gravy."

It was the word *meat,* and Magnus Pieter's seven or eight variations on it, that rang like a knell in Artos's head. For *meat* had been the dragon's final word.

He slunk off without even the promise of a sword, that shining piece of steel that might make him an equal in the eyes of the other boys, the gem still burning brightly in his tightly clenched hand.

He took a small pot of gravy with three pieces of meat with him. Strolling casually out the back gate as if he had all the time in the world, nodding slightly at the guards over the portcullis, Artos could feel his heartbeat quicken. He had walked rather more quickly over the moat bridge, glancing at the gray-green water

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

where the old moat tortoise lazed atop the rusted crown of a battle helm. Once he was across, he began to run.

It was difficult not to spill the stew, but he managed. The path was a worn thread through a wilderness of pools, mosses, and tangled bush. He even clambered over two rock outcroppings on the paths that were studded with stones that looked rather like lumps of meat themselves. And actually climbing over the rocks was easier than wheedling the pot of stew had been. He had it only because Mag the Scullery was sweet on him and he had allowed her to kiss him full on the lips. She hadn't noticed how he had held his breath, hoping to avoid the stink of her garlic, and closed his eyes not to see her bristly mustache. And she sighed so much after the kiss, she hadn't had time to ask what he needed the stew for. But what if the dragon wanted gravy every day and he had to give Mag more kisses? It didn't bear thinking about, so Artos thought instead about the path. The dragon had been right. There was a quicker route back to the mount. Its only disadvantages were the two large rocks and the old thorny briar bushes. But they, at least, were safer than the peat pools that held bones enough way far down.

He got to the cave rather more quickly than he had bargained on. Breathless, he squinted into the dark hole. This time he heard no heavy dragon breathing.

"Maybe," he said aloud to himself, his own voice lending him badly needed courage. "Perhaps there's no one home. So I can just leave the gravy — and go home."

"Staaaaaaaaay," came the sudden rumbling.

Artos almost dropped the pot.

"I have the gravy," he shouted quickly. He hadn't meant to be so loud, but fear always made him either too quiet or too loud. He was never sure which it was to be.

"Then give it to meeeeeeeee," said the voice, followed by the clanking as the great claw extended halfway into the cave.

Artos could tell it was the foot by its long shadow. This time there was no stream of fire, only a hazy smoldering light from the back of the cave. Feeling a little braver then, he said, "I shall need to take the pot back with me. Sir."

"You shall take a bit of wisdom instead," came the voice.

Artos wondered if it would make him wise enough to avoid Mag's sweaty embrace. Somehow he doubted it.

"Tomorrow you shall have the pot. When you bring me more."

"*More*?" This time Artos's voice squeaked.

"Mooooooooore," said the dragon, "With meat!" The nail extended, just as it had the day before, and caught under the pot handle. There was a horrible screeching as the pot was lifted several inches into the air, then

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

slowly withdrawn into the inner recesses of the cave. There were strange scrabbling noises as if the dragon was sorting through its possessions, and then the clanking resumed. The claw returned and dropped something at Artos's feet.

He looked down. It was a book, rather tatty around the edges, he thought, though in the cave light it was hard to be sure.

"Wisssssssdom," said the dragon.

Artos shrugged. "It's a book. I know letters. Father Bertram taught me."

"Lettersssssss turn matter into sssssspirit," hissed the dragon.

"You mean it's a book of magic?"

"All booksssssss are magic, boy." The dragon sounded just a bit cranky.

"Well, I can read," said Artos, stooping to pick up the book. He added a quick, "Thank you," thinking he should seem grateful. *Old thorns and old dragons . . .* he reminded himself.

"You can read *letters,* my boy, which is more than I can say for your castle contemporaries. And you can read *words.* But you must learn to read *inter linea,* between the lines."

Edging backward to the cave's mouth, Artos opened the book and scanned the first page. His fingers underlined each word, his mouth formed them. He turned the page. Then he looked up puzzled. "There is nothing written between the lines. Sir."

Something rather like a chuckle crossed with a cough echoed from the cave. "There is always something written between the lines. But it takes great wisdom to read it."

"Then why me, sir? I have little wisdom."

"Because . . . because you are here."

"Here?"

"Today. And not back at Ector's feeding his brachet or cleaning out the mews or sweating in the smithy or fighting with that pack of unruly boys. Here. For the getting of wisdom." The dragon made stretching noises.

"Oh."

There was a sudden tremendous wheezing and clanking and a strange "Oh-oh" from the dragon.

Artos peered into the back of the cave nervously. It was all darkness and shadow and an occasional finger of firelight. "Are you alright? Sir?"

A long silence followed during which Artos wondered whether he should go to the the dragon. He wondered if he had even the smallest amount of wisdom needed to help out. Then just as he was about to make the plunge, the dragon's voice came hissing back. "Yesssssss, boy."

"Yes, what, sir?"

"Yes, I am alright."

"Well, then," Artos, putting one foot quietly behind the other, "thank you for my wisdom."

A furious flame spat across the cave, leaping through the darkness to lick Artos's feet. He jumped back, startled at the dragon's accuracy, and suddenly hideously afraid. Had it just

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

been preparation for the dragon's dinner after all? He suddenly wished for the sword he had not yet purchased, then turned and ran out of the cave.

The dragon's voice followed him. "Sssssssilly child. That was not the wisdom."

From a safe place alongside the outside wall of the cave, Artos peeked in. "There's more?" he asked.

"By the time I am through with you, Artos Pendragon, Arthur son of the dragon, you will read *inter linea* in people as well." There was a loud moan and another round of furious clanking, and then total silence.

Taking it as a dismissal, and holding the book hard against his chest, Artos ran down the hill. Whatever else he thought about as he neared the castle walls, topmost in his mind was what he would tell Mag about the loss of the gravy pot. It might mean another kiss. That was the fell thought that occupied him all the way home.

Artos could not read the book without help; he knew that at once. The sentences were much too long and interspersed with Latin and other languages. Perhaps that was the between-lines the dragon had meant. The only help available was Old Linn, and he did not appear until well after dinner. Unfortunately, that was the time Artos was the busiest, feeding the dogs, checking the jesses on the hawks, cleaning the smithy. Father Bertram might have helped had he still been alive, though somehow Artos doubted it. The dragon's book was neither Testament nor Commentary — that much he *could* read — and the good father had been fierce about what he considered proper fare. The castle bonfires had often burned texts of which he disapproved. Even Lady Marion's *Book of Hours,* which had taken four scribes the full part of a year to set down, had gone up in Father Bertram's righteous flames because Adam and Eve had no fig leaves. This Artos had on good authority, though he had never seen it himself, for Lady Marion had complained to Lady Sylvia, who had tittered about it to her serving girls, who had passed the news along with the gravy to young Cai, who had mentioned it as a joke to his friends in the cow shed when Artos had been napping in the haymow and overheard them.

No, the good Father Bertram would have never helped. Old Linn, though, was different. He could read four tongues well: English, Latin, Greek, and bardic runes. It was said his room was full of books. He could recite the Conception of Pyrderi, a tale Artos loved for the sheer sound of it, and the stories about the children of Llyr and the Cauldron and the Iron House and the horse made for Bran. Or at least Linn uses to be able to tell them all. Before he had been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

taken ill so suddenly and dramatically, his best piece had always been the Battle of Trees. Artos could not remember a time when dinners of great importance at the castle had not ended with Linn's declaiming of it. In fact, Lord Ector's Irish retainers called Linn *shanachie,* which, as far as Artos could tell from their garbled and endless explanation simply meant "storyteller." But they said the word with awe when coupling it to Old Linn's name.

The problem, Artos thought, was that the old man hated him. Well, perhaps *hate* was too strong a word, but he seemed to prefer the young gentlemen of the house, not the impoverished fosterling. Linn especially lavished attention on Sir Cai, who, as far as Artos was concerned, long ago let his muscles o'ertake his head. And Sir Bedvere, slack-jawed and hard-handed. And Sir Lancot, the pretty boy. Once Artos, too, had tried to curry favor with the trio of lordlings, fetching and carrying and helping them with their schoolwork. But then they all grew up, and the three grew up faster and taller and louder. And once Sir Lancot as a joke had pulled Artos's pants down around his ankles in the courtyard, and the other two called out the serving maids to gawk. And that led to Mag's getting sweet on him, which was why he had grown to despise Mag and pity the boys, even though they were older and bigger and better placed than he.

Still, there was a time for putting aside such feelings, thought Artos. The getting of wisdom was surely such a time. He would need help in reading the dragon's book. None of the others, Cai or Bedvere or Lancot, could read half as well as he. They could only just make out the instructions on packets of love philters. Lord Ector could not read at all. So it would have to be Old Linn.

But to his despair, the apothecary could not be found after dinner. In desperation, Artos went to talk to the old man's best friend, the smith.

"Come now, young Art," called out Magnus Pieter as Artos approached the smithy. "Did we not have words just yesterday? Something about a sword and a stone?"

Artos tried to think of a way to get the conversation around to Linn's whereabouts, but the conversation would not move at his direction. The smith willed it where he would. At last there was nothing left to do but remove the leathern bag from around his neck and take out the jewel. He dropped it onto the anvil. It made a funny little pinging sound.

Magnus sucked on his lower lip and snorted through his nose. "By God, boy, and where'd you get that stone?"

To tell the truth meant getting swatted for a liar. He suddenly realized it would be the same if he showed the book to Linn. So he lied. "I was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

left it by . . . Father Bertram," he said. "And I've. . . ." The lies came slowly. He was, by inclination, an honest boy. He preferred silence to an to untruth.

". . . kept it till now, have you?" asked the smith. "Well, well, and of course you have. After all, there's not much in that village of ours to spend such a jewel on."

Artos nodded silently, thankful to have Magnus Pieter do the lying for him.

"And what would you be wanting for such a jewel?" asked the smith with the heavy-handed jocularity he always confused with cunning.

Knowing that he must play the innocent in order to get the better bargain, Artos said simply, "Why, a sword, of course."

"Of course!" Magnus Pieter laughed, hands on hips, throwing his head back.

Since every smith he had ever known laughed in just that way, Artos assumed it was something taught.

The smith stopped laughing and cocked his head to one side. "Well?"

"I am old enough to have a sword of my own, " said Artos. "And now I can pay for a good one."

"How good?" asked the smith in his heavy manner.

Artos knelt before the anvil, and the red jewel was at the level of his eyes. As if he were addressing the stone and not the smith, he chanted a bit from a song Old Linn used to sing:

• • •

And aye their swordes soe sore can byte, Throughe help of gramarye....

From behind him the smith sighed. "Aye," the old man said, " and a good sword it shall be. A fine blade, a steel of power. And while I make it for you, young poet, you must think of a good name for your sword from this stone." He reached across Artos's shoulder and plucked up the jewel, holding it high over both their heads. For a moment he thought he saw dragon fire leaping and crackling there. Then he remembered the glowing coals of the forge. The stone reflected that, nothing more.

"Perhaps," he said, thinking out loud, "perhaps I shall call it *Interlinea*."

The smith smiled. "Fine name, that. Makes me think of foreign climes." He pocketed the stone and began to work. Artos turned and left, for he had chores to do in the mews.

Each day that followed meant another slobbery kiss from Mag and another pot of stew. It seemed to Artos a rather messy prelude to wisdom. But after a week of it, he found the conversations with the dragon worth the mess.

The dragon spoke knowingly of other lands where man walked on their heads instead of feet. Of lands down beneath the sea where the bells rang in underwater churches with each passing wave. It taught Artos

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

riddles and their answers, like

As round as an apple, as deep as a cup, And all the king's horses can't pull it up

—which was a *well,* of course.

And it sang him ballads from the prickly gorse-covered land of the Scots, who ran naked and screaming into battle. And songs from the cold, icy Norsemen who prowled in their dragon ships. And love songs from the silk-and-honey lands of Araby.

And once the dragon taught him a trick with pots and jewels, clanking and creaking noisily all the while, its huge foot mixing up the pots till Artos's head fair ached to know under which one lay the emerald as big as an egg. And that game he had used later with Lancot and Bedvere and Cai and won from them a number of gold coins till they threatened him. With his promised new sword, he might have beaten them, but not with his bare hands. So he used a small man's wiles to trick them once again, picked up the winnings, and left them grumbling over the cups and peas he had used for the game.

It took three tries and seven months before Artos had his sword. Each new steel had something unacceptable about it. The first had a hilt that did not sit comfortably in his hand. Bedvere claimed it instead, and Magnus Pieter was so pleased with the coins Sir Bedvere paid, it was weeks before he was ready to work on another. Instead he shoed horses, made latches, and a gigantic candelabra for the dining room to Lady Marion's specifications.

The second sword had a strange crossbar that the smith swore would help protect the hand. Artos thought the sword unbalanced, but Cai, who prized newness over all things, insisted that he wanted the blade. Again Magnus Pieter was pleased enough to spend the weeks following making farm implements like plowshares and hoes.

The third sword was still bright with its tempering when Lancot claimed it.

"Cai and Bedvere have new swords," Lancot said, his handsome face drawn down with longing. He reached his hand out.

Artos, who had been standing in the shadows of the smithy, was about to say something when Old Linn hobbled in. His mouth and hair spoke of a lingering illness, both being yellowed and lifeless. but his voice was strong.

"You were always a man true to his word," he reminded the smith.

"And true to my swords," said Magnus Pieter, pleased with the play.

Artos stepped from the shadows then and held out his hand. The smith put the sword in it, and Artos turned it this way and that to catch the light. The watering on the blade made a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strange pattern that looked like the flame from a dragon's mouth. It sat well and balanced in his hand.

"He likes the blade," said Old Linn.

Magnus Pieter shrugged smiling.

Artos turned to thank the apothecary, but he was gone and so was Lancot. When he peered out the smithy door, there were the two of them walking arm in arm up the winding path toward the castle.

"So you've got your *Inter-linea* now," said the smith. "And about time you took one. Nothing wrong with the other two."

"*And* you got a fine price for them," Artos said.

The smith returned to his anvil, and the clang of hammer on new steel ended their conversation.

Artos ran out of the castle grounds, hallowing so loudly even the tortoise dozing on the rusted helm lifted its sleepy head. He fairly leapt over the rocks in the path. They seemed to have gotten smaller with each trip to the dragon's lair. He was calling when he approached the entrance of the cave.

"Ho, old flame-tongue," he cried out, the sword allowing him his first attempt at familiarity. "Furnace-lung, look what I have. My sword. From the stone you gave me. It is a rare beauty."

There was no answer.

Suddenly afraid that he had overstepped the bounds and that the dragon lay sulking within, Artos peered inside.

The cave was dark, cold, silent.

Slowly Artos walked in and stopped about halfway. He felt surrounded by the icy silence. But that was all. There was no sense of dragon there.

"Sir? Father Dragon? Are you home?" He put a hand up to one of the hanging stones to steady himself. In the complete dark he had little sense of what was up and what was down.

Then he laughed. "Oh, I know, you have gone out on a flight." It was the only answer that came to him, though the dragon had never once mentioned flying. But everyone knew dragons had wings. And wings mean flight. Artos laughed again, a hollow little chuckle. Then he turned toward the small light of the cave entrance. "I'll come back tomorrow. At my regular time," he called over his shoulder. He said it out loud just in case the dragon's magic extended to retrieving words left in the still cave air. "Tomorrow," Artos promised.

But the pattern had been altered subtly and, like a weaving gone awry, could not be changed back to the way it had been without a weakness in the cloth.

The next day Artos did not go to the cave. Instead he practiced swordplay with willow wands in the main courtyard, beating Cai soundly and being beaten in turn by both Bedvere and Lancot.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The following morn he and the three older boys were sent by Lady Marion on a fortnight's journey to gather gifts of jewels and silks from the market towns for the coming holy days. Some at Ector's castle celebrated the solstice with the druids, some kept the holiday for the Christ child's birth, and a few of the old soldiers still drank bull's blood and spoke of Mithras in secret meetings under the castle, for there was a vast warren of halls and rooms there. But they all gave gifts to one another at the year's turning, whichever gods they knelt to.

It was Artos's first such trip. The other boys had gone the year before under Linn's guidance. This year the four of them were given leave to go alone. Cai was so pleased, he forgave Artos for the beating. Suddenly they were the best of friends. and Bedvere and Lancot, who had beaten him, loved Artos now as well, for even when he had been on the ground with the wand at his throat and his face and arms red from the lashings, he had not cried "hold." There had been not even the hint of tears in his eyes. They admired him for that.

With his bright new sword belted at his side, brand-new leggings from the castle stores, and the new-won friends riding next to him, it was no wonder Artos forgot the dragon and the dark cave. Or, if he did not exactly forget, what he remembered was that the dragon hadn't been there when he wanted it the most. So, for a few days, for a fortnight, Artos felt he could, like Cai, glory in the new.

He did not glory in the dragon. It was old, old past counting the years, old past helping him, old and forgetful.

They came home with red, rosy cheeks polished by the winter wind and bags packed with treasure. An extra two horses carried the overflow.

Cai, who had lain with his first girl, a serving wench of little beauty and great reputation, was full of new boasts. Bedvere and Lancot had won a junior tourney, for boys under sixteen, Bedvere with his sword and Lancot the lance. And though Artos had been a favorite on the outbound trip — full of wonderful stories, riddles, and songs — as they turned toward home, he had lapsed into long silences. By the time they were but a day's hard ride away, it was as if his mouth were bewitched.

The boys teased him, thinking it was Mag who worried him.

"Afraid of Old Garlic, then?" asked Cai. "At least Rosemary's breath was sweet." (Rosemary being the serving wench's name.)

"Or are you afraid of my sword?" said Bedvere.

"Or my lance?" Lancot added brightly.

When he kept silent, they tried to wheedle the cause of his set lips by reciting castle gossip. Every maiden,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

every alewife, every false nurse was named. Then they turned their attention to the men. They never mentioned dragons, though, for they did not know one lived by the castle walls. Artos had never told them of it.

But it was the dragon, of course, that concerned him. With each mile he remembered the darkness, the complete silence of the cave. At night he dreamed of it, the cave opening staring down from the hill like the empty eye socket of a long-dead beast.

They unpacked the presents carefully and carried them up to Lady Marion's quarters. She, in turn, fed them wine and cakes in her apartments, a rare treat. Her minstrel, a handsome boy except for his wandering left eye, sang a number of songs while they ate, even one in a Norman dialect. Artos drank only a single mouthful of the sweet wine. He ate nothing. He had heard all the songs before.

Thus, it was well past sundown before Lady Marion let them go.

Artos would not join the others who were going to report to Lord Ector. He pushed Cai and ran down the stairs. The other boys called after him, but he ignored them. Only the startled ends of their voices followed him.

He hammered on the gate until the guards lifted the iron portcullis, then he ran across the moat bridge. Dark, muddy lumps in the mushy ice were the only signs of life.

As he ran, he held his hand over his heart, cradling the two pieces of cake he had slipped into his tunic. Since he had had no time to beg stew from Mag, he hoped seedcakes would do instead. He did not, for a moment, believe the dragon had starved to death without his poor offering of stew. The dragon had existed many years before Artos had found the cave. It was not the *size* of the stew but the *fact* of it.

He stubbed his toe on the second outcropping hard enough to force a small mewing sound from between his lips. The tor was icy, and that made climbing it difficult. Foolishly he'd forgotten his gloves with his saddle gear. And he'd neglected to bring a light.

When he got to the mouth of the cave and stepped in, he was relieved to hear heavy breathing echoing off the cave wall, until he realized it was the sound of his own ragged breath.

"*Dragon*!" he cried out, his voice a misery.

Suddenly there was a small moan and an even smaller glow, like dying embers that have been breathed upon one last time.

"Is that you, my son?" The voice was scarcely a whisper, so quiet the walls could not find enough to echo.

"Yes, dragon," said Artos. "It is I."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Did you bring me any stew?"

"Only two seedcakes."

"I like seedcakes."

"Then I'll bring them to you."

"Noooooooo." The sound held only the faintest memory of the powerful voice of before.

But Artos had already started toward the back of the cave, one hand in front to guide himself around the overhanging rocks. He was halfway there when he stumbled against something and fell heavily to his knees. Feeling around, he touched a long, metallic curved blade.

"Has someone been here? Has someone tried to slay you?" he cried. Then, before the dragon could answer, Artos's hand traveled farther along the blade to its strange metallic base.

His hands told him what his eyes could not; his mouth spoke what his heart did not want to hear. "It is the dragon's foot."

He leaned over the metal construct and scrambled over a small rocky wall. Behind it, in the dying glow of a small fire, lay an old man on a straw bed. Near him were tables containing beakers full of colored liquids: amber, rose, green, and gold. On the wall were strange toothed wheels with handles.

The old man raised himself on one arm. "Pendragon," he said and tried to set his lips into a welcoming smile. "Son."

"Old Linn," replied Artos angrily, "I am no son of yours."

"There was once," the old man began quickly, settling into a story before Artos's anger had time to gel, "a man who would know Truth. And he traveled all over the land looking."

Without willing it, Artos was pulled into the tale.

"He looked along the seacoasts and in the quiet farming dales. He went into the country of lakes and across vast deserts seeking Truth. At last one dark night, in a small cave atop a hill, he found her. Truth was a wizened old woman with but a single tooth left in her head. Her eyes were rheumy; her hair greasy strands. But when she called him into her cave, her voice was low and lyric and pure, and that was how he knew he had found Truth."

Artos stirred uneasily.

The old man went on. "He stayed a year and a day by her side and learned all she had to teach. And when his time was done, he said, 'My Lady Truth, I must go back to my own home now. But I would do something for you in exchange.'" Linn stopped, the silence between them grew until it was almost a wall.

"Well, what did she say?" Artos asked at last.

"She told him, 'When you talk of me, tell your people that I am young and beautiful.'"

For a moment Artos said nothing. Then he barked out a short, quick laugh. "So much for truth."

Linn sat up and patted the mat-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tress beside him, an invitation Artos ignored. "Would you have listened these seven months to an old apothecary who had a tendency to fits?"

"You did not tell me the truth."

"I did not lie. You *are* the dragon's son."

Artos set his mouth and turned his back on the old man. His voice came out low and strained. "*I... am ... not ... your ... son.*"

"It is true that you did not spring from my loins," said the old man. "But I carried you here to Ector's castle and waited and hoped you would seek out my wisdom. But you longed for the truth of lance and sword. I did not have that to give." His voice was weak and seemed to end in a terrible sigh.

Artos did not turn around. "I believed in the dragon."

Linn did not answer.

"I *loved* the dragon."

The silence behind him was so loud that at last Artos turned around. The old man had fallen onto his side and lay still. Artos felt something warm on his cheeks and realized that they were tears. He ran to Linn and knelt down, pulling the old man onto his lap. As he cradled him, Linn opened his eyes.

"Did you bring me any stew?" he asked.

"I. . . ." the tears were falling unchecked now. "I brought you seedcakes."

Special offer from the award-winning SF magazine: A full year (12 issues) of F&SF for only $15.97, saving you $5.03 off the newsstand price.

+ 11 time winner of the Hugo award for best SF magazine or best editor.
+ Publisher of more Nebula award winning stories (selected by the Science Fiction Writers of America) than any other publication.
+ Winner of the 1977, 1978, 1979 and 1980 Locus polls as best SF magazine.
+ Winner of the World Fantasy Award, 1979, 1982; Balrog Award, 1981, 1983.

Please use the coupon on the reverse side; it is backed by this copy, and removal does not affect the test of the story.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I like seedcakes," Linn said. "But couldn't you get any stew from Old Garlic?"

Artos felt his mouth drop open. "How did you know about her?"

The old man smiled, showing terrible teeth. He whispered: "I am the Great Riddler. I am the Master of Wisdom. I am the Word and I am the Light. I Was and Am and Will Be." He hesitated. "I am the Dragon."

Artos smiled back and then carefully stood with the old man in his arms. He was amazed at how frail Linn was. *His bones*, Artos thought, *must be as hollow as the wing bones of a bird.*

There was a door in the cave wall, and Linn signaled him toward it. Carrying the old apothecary through the doorway, Artos marveled at the runes carved in the lintel. Past the door was a warren of hallways and rooms. From somewhere ahead he heard the chanting of many men.

Artos looked down at the old man and whispered to him. "Yes. I understand. You *are* the dragon indeed. And I am the dragon's boy. But I will not let you die just yet. I have not finished getting my wisdom."

Smiling broadly, the old man turned in toward him, like a baby rooting at its mother's breast, found the seedcakes, ate one of them, and then, with a gesture both imperious and fond, stuffed the other in Artos's mouth.

FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753 7591

☐ **Yes, send me 12 issues of F&SF, the award-winning magazine, for only $15.97, saving $5.03 off the newsstand price**

☐ **Check here if you would like to extend or renew your current sub.**

Name_____

Address_____

City _____ **State**_____ **Zip**_____

Outside the U.S., please add $3.00 for postage. Please make all checks payable in U.S. dollars.
Allow six weeks for delivery of first copy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Richard Mueller has previously written convincingly about flying ("Welcome To Coventry," March 1983). Here, he offers a new tale about a WW II bomber and a radio operator who starts seeing odd things in the sky.

Little Friends

BY
RICHARD MUELLER

Captain Tazio had no interest in anything out of the ordinary unless it interfered directly with either the mission or his love life. I couldn't blame him. We were running a big mission in those days, what with the stepped-up strikes on German war industries, the heavy losses over the sub pens, and the teething problems on the new G models. And the pressure. We'd just completed our twenty-third mission on the *Miss Lydia*. Two more and we'd be rotated home. And Charlie Howell had made lead bombardier, which bumped Tazio up to even more responsibility. It was a big job for a twenty-five-year-old kid, and I didn't envy him.

Naturally, Tazio played hard. There was talk that he had a woman in London and one in Molesworth, our base's host town. Didn't surprise me. He had those boyish dark Italian good looks. He could've probably talked himself under any skirt in England. That he restrained himself to two was remarkable enough. But, like I say, he took his job seriously.

I was the odd wheel on the crew. At thirty, they called me "Pops" or "Teach" (the war had rescued me from the doldrums of the Brattleboro grade school system), and I was sort of the crew's Dutch uncle. Not surprising, either. I had five years on the oldest of them, Tazio. I flew the No. 2 seat on the *Miss Lydia,* and as long as Tazio functioned, my duties consisted primarily of backup. I spelled Tazio on the long routine stretches between attacks. I coordinated fighter defense. I helped patch up the wounded. I was reserve radioman, bombardier, engineer, gunner. And I was morale officer.

Not by choice, by Tazio.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Hey Pops, I need a new chute."

"Teach, can you swing us a leave?"

"Lieutenant, I gotta see the chaplain."

But I didn't much mind. It made the time more interesting, and I was learning the service from the ground up. I figured that, by the end of the war, I would know enough to start my own Air Corps. And, it was a good lesson in when to say "no."

But not to Tazio. Rank hath.

"Chick, can I talk to you?" Tazio always called me "Chick," never Pops or Teach. I guess it made him feel older. Or maybe, being a New Yorker, he just didn't want to grant that much deference to a "Ninglander."

"Yes, Captain."

"Please. Tony. After all . . ."

Uh-oh. Tazio was predictable. This meant trouble. I had made arrangements to run up to London to catch a show — *Man and Superman* — then late dinner with a cousin serving on First Army staff. I needed to get away, but Tazio obviously had other ideas. He favored me with a disgustingly disarming smile.

"Whaddaya want, Captain?"

"Will you talk to Bozemann before you leave? I'm kinda worried about him."

Then why don't you talk to him? "What's his problem?"

"I think he may be getting a little sky-happy. Micky Keller said Bozemann thinks he's been seeing things."

"What kind of things?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

"Why doesn't he see the shrink? Send him up to London for a day. Let him look at a few inkblots. It'll make him feel better."

"That's what Micky told him, but Bozemann said no. He thinks he's fine."

They always do. Bozemann was either crazy or faking, and faking sharp enough to not act like he thought he was crazy. But that wasn't Bozemann's style. He was Gulf Texas, happy to be here, liked his job. He was a good radioman, lousy gunner, and never caused any trouble. Typical career Air Corps, if he survived, and with luck he would. In twenty-three trips with Tony Tazio, we'd lost only three killed and three wounded. That was another reason I tolerated Tazio. He was a damned good pilot.

"O.K., I'll see him."

"Thanks, Chick. I owe ya."

Thanks, Tony. That makes about eight hundred you owe me. So I trotted across to the crew's barracks to look up Johnny Ray Bozemann.

Bozemann roomed with Micky Keller, and Micky was up to London. We were off the line for two days, and most of the crew had scattered far and wide. Not Bozemann. He was sitting on his bunk reading a book when I entered. The door was open. I knocked on the jamb.

Bozemann was a big blond farm kid, all lanky mass, but with small hands and long fingers. Perfect radio-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

man hands. He saw me and started to get up, but I waved him down.

"At ease, Johnny. Can I come in?"

"Sure, Lieutenant."

I perched on the foot of the bed. Bozemann noted my leave regs.

"Goin' up ta London, sir?"

"Yup. How about you? Planning on seeing the sights before we cycle out again?"

"Naw. Gonna read."

"May I?"

He handed the book over somewhat reluctantly. It was a hardbound, and not a library book, either. That meant it was a gift, or Bozemann had bought it. I read the spine. *Spirit Phenomena of the Heights* by G. W. Lancaster. Bozemann accepted it back, guiltily.

"Interesting?"

"Yessir."

"Ghost stories?"

"Nossir."

I tried a new tack. "You happy here, Johnny?"

"Yessir, Lieutenant," he said earnestly. "I like it fine. Sure beats Graves Registration."

Standard ugly joke. Wash out anywhere and you wind up in Tunisia, collecting dog tags and planting corpses.

"Sure does. No problems, then?"

He set down the book and fixed me with an intensely serious expression that he'd obviously seen in a movie. I restrained myself from laughing.

"Lieutenant, I'm happy to be here, and proud to be doing my job, winning this war for America."

I gave up and caught the late train.

I forgot about Bozemann. Over the next two days, I got Noblitt's teeth fixed, told Berman that his brother had been killed on Rendova (Berman didn't seem to care, and I filed *that* information away; keep an eye on him), and told Keller to write to his family more often. I'd missed the play the night I'd had my useless talk with Bozemann, and my cousin, a twenty-seven-year-old major, had made me feel like the family failure. (*Tom's a captain, Jim won the Silver Star, you like being a* copilot?) I wrote off the leave and got ready for the next round of hell.

Twenty-four was a run on the sub pens at Lorient. Nasty work. Heavy flak and almost no chance of doing any damage to the subs, safe under yards of concrete. And fighters: 190s, 110s, 109s; and our formation just loose enough to let them in. It was all I could do to keep them on top of the brawl.

Keller, (Top Turret): "Two 110s coming in, one-thirty high."

Howells (Nose Turret): "I'm on 'em."

Me: "Track 'em. Don't fire into the wing ship." Tail, watch for a twelve o'clock low pass under."

Noblitt (Tail Guns): "There goes the forty ship. Got a 110 at six o'clock

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

low. He'll have ta veer."

Me: "Smith, heads up."

Smith (Ball Turret): "Got 'em. Pass on the port side."

Like that, but faster, I listened, watched for anything ahead, and directed the gunners on to stray bandits that might break through. We'd beaten off the first attack with two losses and no hits on the *Lydia*, and things were back to normal, when Bozemann screamed.

"There they are! I see 'em."

I could hear turrets grinding in the intercom. "Where?" I cried. "Report!"

"Ten-thirty high. No, not fighters. Them!"

Tazio and I automatically looked toward the port forward quadrant. There was nothing but clouds. Tazio covered his mike.

"I thought you said he was O.K."

"I never said that. I said I couldn't find out what was wrong."

Tazio gave me a dirty look. "Bozemann, this is Tazio. Shut up. What's out there?"

There was a chatter of crew cross talk, but no Bozemann.

"Bozemann."

Keller came on the line. "Cap'n, he won't say. He's O.K., he's, aw . . . I don't know."

"Dammit, keep your heads up and don't fuck around."

Tazio was a grim S.O.B. for the rest of the flight, which included a smashed Norden, bombs off target, a shredded aileron, and a million-dollar hole in the butt for John Noblitt.

""Whaddaya mean, 'you talk to him'? You're his skipper. He went nuts up there. Bench him. Put him in the shrink line."

Tazio threw the file on his desk. "He's also a crack radio operator. . . ."

"Cracked, you mean."

"Shut up, Henderson."

We stared at each other. I counted to ten, avoiding the courtmartial I knew would come from my next word. Tazio refused to soften.

"I'm not shipping Bozemann out with one mission to go and getting some snot-nosed kid straight out of Kansas. Johnny'll just get assigned to another crew and maybe killed. And we'll have to fly the big one with a bum radioman. I don't want that, especially now. . . . "

My ears lifted. "You heard something?"

He shook his head, then stopped. He put a hand on my shoulder, but I was too tight to push it away. "You heard something?"

He nodded. "Deal?"

"Talk."

"I tell you, you talk to Bozemann?"

"You bastard, *sir*."

Tazio grinned.

"Where?"

"The factories at Hamm."

Mother of God.

I didn't have the slightest idea on how to approach it, so I fell back on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rank. It made me feel shitty, and stupid, but I was worried about Hamm. The flak was the least of it. Several hours without our little friends in the fighters would be hell. Sour oxygen, freezing air, stay-up pills, noise, bloodshed. Three out of every ten planes would likely be hit, and hit badly. Half of them wouldn't come back. But if we did, it was rotation home. I could almost smell Vermont. Bozemann was going to get his shit together and fast, or I'd bench him with a broken jaw.

I collected him, and we took a walk out to the flight line. He knew he was in trouble, and I didn't want to give him the time to build a story, so I got right to it. Educated guess.

"What did you see over Lorient?"

He stopped, hung his head. "Lieutenant, you won't believe me."

Bingo.

"Try me."

"Aw, sir . . ."

"Bozemann, you talk. Now. Or you'll spend rotation tour in the psychiatric hospital, understand?"

He nodded. Then he began to talk, slowly at first, then with a rush like a collapsing dam.

"I started seeing them on my first tour. Just a few times, like little lights in the clouds. Only once or twice, and way off. And they weren't planes. I know planes. I seen more planes in the last year than I want to think about; ours, theirs, limeys. I can tell a 190 from a 109 by the engine noise on the other side of the formation. I've never fired on one of ours by accident. You try me with the spotter cards. I'm good.

"But these were lights, little lights. Moving fast. I'd guess about six, seven hundred miles an hour, and that's on the climb. And tight turns, Lieutenant. Like a weasel down a gopher hole. Nossir, they weren't planes."

"Have you . . . ?"

"Talked to anyone else? Nossir. And I listened a lot at the U.S.O., the E.M. clubs, to other guys talkin', but I never heard anyone talk about anything like it. So, I just waited. I watched. I figured they weren't hurtin' me none, and with the Jerries I got enough trouble up there. Then ... you remember Romilly Ess Ess?"

I nodded. Romilly Sur Seine. The Dewoitine Aircraft plant; our third mission and a real killer. We'd lost our ball turret gunner, blown right out of the plane, and three wounded seriously. Tim Benson had come back with one hand and one foot. One shell. Murder.

"Well, during the battle I was running the radio room gun and trying to keep from shooting off the tail. I know I'm not too good on the fifties, but I did hit a 190 that day."

"And you saw the lights?"

"Yessir. Three of 'em. And I heard 'em, too."

I stopped. We were standing beneath the hulking wing of a seventeen, the *Jock of Hearts,* Tom Hunni-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cut's ship. "You heard them?"

"Yessir, on my headset."

"Your headset. On the radio."

He shook his head earnestly. "On the intercom channel, Lieutenant. I could hear their voices."

"Could you have been mistaken?" Bozemann was starting to give me the creeps.

"Nossir. They weren't speaking English. It was a foreign language and none I've ever heard. It wasn't German and it sure wasn't French. A little like Japanese." He shrugged. "Or like what I guess Japanese would sound like. I haven't heard much of it.

"Anyway, it was real fast, like speeding up a record. And when the lights went away, I didn't hear it anymore. That's when I started seeing a mentalist."

I groaned. A mentalist. Séances and science-of-mind nonsense. England seemed to be full of them that season, real ones and phony ones. Or phony ones and phonier ones. Everyone wanted to know when the war would end and when their Alf would come home, and there were plenty of men and women about willing to pick up a fast buck for telling them. But Bozemann knew just what I was thinking.

"Relax, sir. I didn't tell him anything he couldn'ta read in the papers, and he didn't ask. But he put me on to the spirits. The spirits in the heights."

He looked at me. I just waited for him to go on.

"Well, sir, a lot of people believed for a long time that there are things that live in the air. Intelligent things, that live there like we live on the ground. Does any of this make sense, Lieutenant?"

It did, in an odd way. "I read a lot, Johnny. When I was a kid, I read a story by Arthur Conan Doyle called *The Horror of the Heights.* It gave me a real chill." Like I'm feeling now, I thought.

Bozemann nodded. "I read it. Mr. Hubert, the mentalist, gave it to me to read. But it's not like that. They're friendly. Or at least not evil like in the story. They're just watching." He grinned shyly. "Too bad we can't get them on our side, eh, Lieutenant? Like our little friends, the fighters."

"Yeah."

I was stumped. He believed it, completely, and nothing I could do would shake him. Nothing I could say would make the slightest bit of difference. I could only try to pave it over and hope we could get past Hamm. Then we could go home. Then we would be safe.

"Johnny."

"Yessir?"

"Johnny, I'm going to tell you something, and in return you're going to do something for me, O.K.?"

"Sir?"

"You don't agree, and I can see that you spend the rest of the war in the hospital. You want that?" I knew that some men would prefer that easy

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

way out, But not Johnny Ray Bozemann.

"Nossir. I'll do whatever you like."

"Good. Johnny, we're going in deep tomorrow — Hamm, I think. We're going to have to be on our toes if we want to come back, and I want to come back. You know what that means?"

"Rotation home."

"Right. So you don't say anything about your lights. You man your radio and your gun, and we all come back and we all go home. O.K.?"

After a moment he nodded.

"Get some sleep," I said, and walked away.

Lead ship takes the flak. Lead ship gets the fighters. By the time we pulled away from the target, we'd gotten both. Brownstein, the replacement gunner for Noblitt, was dead. Tazewell went back to cover the tail. Charlie Howells was bleeding from a leg wound. Port flap was jammed, three-quarters of the ammo gone, ball turret stuck, life rafts ruined, windshield smashed. The oxygen lines had been shot away, and we'd been forced to drop out of formation to bring her down to where we could breathe. It was more dangerous flying alone, but perhaps they wouldn't be looking for a single plane running low.

The wind whistled through the cockpit. Tony Tazio and I were both bleeding from Perspex fragments, but we were alive. Tazio looked at me. His grin was tired, but nothing could throw Don Juan for long.

"Rough trip."

"Yeah. Too bad about the new kid," I said. He nodded.

"This is gonna sound crude, Chick, but I'd rather it was him than one of us."

"No argument."

He banked us toward the Dutch coast. I watched trees and farms fly by below, the rushing air burning my face. At least it was no longer freezing cold.

"Chick, thanks again for talking to Bozemann. I guess he's O.K."

"Yeah." I glared at him. "Hamm, huh? You said we were going to Hamm, not Kiel. Not the goddamn sub pens at Kiel."

Tazio shrugged. "So, I got some wrong info. No harm done, right?"

"Tell that to Brownstein."

"You knowing about Kiel wouldn't have made squat to Brownstein," Tony said logically. "He'd still be dead. And I said thank you. What more do you want? You want to fly the plane?"

"No, I don't want to fly the damned plane."

"Hey, talk nice about her. She's named for my sister, y'know."

"I know, I know."

I actually saw it before I heard it, a blur that crossed my vision, the holes opening the cockpit wall, smashed and flying instruments, sound following. "Fighters!" I screamed into the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mike. "Get on it. Tony, bank!"

But the shots that had missed me had torn off Tony Tazio's handsome jaw and blown open his chest. I saw his heart pumping redly before he collapsed forward onto the controls. *Miss Lydia* lurched, and heeled into a clumsy dive.

I screamed and tore Tazio loose from the stick, struggling to unstrap him, push his body out of the seat as his blood spattered me. The Dutch countryside rushed upward.

"Crew. Report!"

Tazio tumbled into the aisle as I pulled her out, tearing across the fields at a thousand feet.

"Report, dammit!"

They called in, one by one. It was worse than I thought. Bow, ball, and top turrets out. Keller dead, three wounded. And Tazio.

"What hit us?"

"One-nineties. Two of 'em."

"Heads up. I'm going down on the deck so they can't get under us. Watch for 'em."

I knew they'd hit us again. We were too good a target. They'd come at us from the starboard side, one-thirty level, which meant they were somewhere off to the port side, circling, probably ahead of us with their greater speed. Then they'd hit us from the front, smash the engines and me, and we had no functioning bow guns. I banked right, hoping to give the cheek or waist guns a shot.

"Lieutenant, they're there." The voice was strained, scared. I couldn't blame him. I was well over the edge myself.

"Where, Bozemann?"

"In the radio. Not the fighters, them!"

"Bozemann, shut up, dammit. Not now. Get on a gun, any gun."

We flashed over a village laid out between intersecting canals, the light flak winking, too late to hit us. I twisted about frantically, searching for the fighters. They'd come in at ten-thirty high, or twelve o'clock if they could manage it.

A flash of lights. Bozemann? No, the sun on Perspex. Two of them, coming in leisurely, taking their time.

"Heads up, ten-thirty high. Cheek and waist, get ready."

"Lieutenant . . ."

"Not now!"

The specks leveled out slowly. They drifted right, to come ahead of us. I strained to bring *Miss Lydia* around, a wounded, lumbering elephant. The fighters were fast, but if I could just bring our guns to bear . . .

"Little friends, please. Please! Help us now."

"Bozemann," Howells called. "There's none of our fighters out this far."

"Please!"

The 190s drifted in front of me, lazily, taking their time. They would line me up and shoot when they couldn't miss. I watched them grow larger and larger, waiting for the lit-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tle lights of their wing guns.

"Please, please . . ."

"Here they come," I said foolishly.

And then the right-hand 190 flew apart, wings spinning high and wide, the propeller diving lazily toward the fields. The other slewed wildly to the left, trying to escape, but its tail fell off, as if a vast invisible blade had dropped through it. It paused, then, firing its guns in a last defiant act, it plunged into the earth.

"Lieutenant? Captain? What happened?"

"The fighters, they . . . they're gone."

"What?"

"Gone. Just gone."

And in the background I could hear Bozemann's soft voice repeating over and over, "Thank you, thank you, little friends, thank you."

They patched me up and shipped me back to Wright Field to start in the new B-29 program. With *Miss Lydia* shot to pieces and three out of ten dead, they broke up the crew: some to training, some to leave, then back to England. I lost touch almost immediately. I suppose that's war.

But when I hit the States, I did write. The answers came back, some of them. And finally a letter from England, from a doctor, explaining Bozemann's condition, his delusions, asking me if I had any information. But I know what they'd say if I told them, so I can't. There's no way I can help. Nothing I can do. But I wish, I wish I could. Please.

Coming soon

Next month: Don't miss the 36th anniversary all-star issue, on sale August 30. It will feature brand new novelets by **James Tiptree, Jr.** and **Marion Zimmer Bradley,** along with short stories from **Ron Goulart, George Alec Effinger, C. L. Grant, Fred Saberhagen** and **John Brunner.**

N. B.: This will be one of your last chances to avoid an upcoming subscription price increase. The coupon on page 106 enables you to enter a new subscription or extend your current one at the present low rate, which will be increased this Fall. Don't delay!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Haskell Barkin's fiction has appeared in Playboy, Ellery Queen's *and others, and he has written for a variety of TV series, ranging from Loveboat to Tales from the Dark Side. His latest story concerns a most unusual doctor, one who gets results...*

Pain Killer

BY
HASKELL BARKIN

One evening a man's face appeared on the screen in Harvey Beeman's living room. Now, this is not the sort of news that makes headlines. We all have screens in our living rooms, and they all have faces on them.

But the screen on which Harvey saw the face wasn't a television set. It was a computer monitor. Until the man's face appeared (fortyish, wearing tie, jacket, and pleasant smile), the screen was displaying a string of computer programming commands. They reappeared after the momentary guest appearance.

"Did you see that, Nadine?' Harvey asked his wife, who was across the room watching television, listening through an earplug.

"See what?"

"The face on the computer screen."

Nadine glanced at the screen, then glared at Harvey.

"There is no face on your computer screen."

"It flashed on for a second. A man. Smiling. I think he may have winked at me."

"Winked at you?"

"I think so."

"That's impossible, Harvey."

"I know."

"You've been daydreaming again."

"No darling, I really was concentrating."

"You couldn't have been concentrating if you saw a man winking at you on your computer screen." Nadine sighed."Do you want to have dirty fingernails *all* your life, Harvey?"

"No."

"Then you'd better get back to your homework. Or don't you want to pass your test tomorrow?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"You know I do."

"Sometimes I wonder."

Nadine returned to the television set. Her remark about dirty fingernails referred to Harvey's present employment as a clerk in the parts department of an automobile dealership. Harvey was spending his nights studying computer programming in order to better himself.

It was Nadine's idea. He supposed she was right. There was more money in computer programming. And "Harvey's in computers" certainly carried more weight than "Harvey sells oil filters to people." Especially when announced as if it were the punch line of a joke.

Of course, Harvey liked working in the parts department. He liked working with things he could lift and feel. He liked the people. He even thought the money wasn't bad, despite Nadine's constant complaint about how she could barely make it on his take-home. And then there was the possibility of becoming parts manager before not too long.

Harvey had fought computer programming for a long time. Not only with Nadine, but with her brother, Elroy, who lifted weights.

"She's my kid sister," Elroy would announce to Harvey with great regularity, while giving his brother-in-law's shoulder a friendly squeeze that brought tears to Harvey's eyes. "I'd hate to think anybody was abusing her." In Elroy's book, Nadine was being abused by Harvey's pigheaded lack of ambition.

So Harvey finally gave in. And what had it gotten him? Hours of the dreariest classroom work, headaches, and more hours of even drearier homework in front of that computer monitor.

And now maybe it was driving him literally crazy, making him see things.

Harvey bent his head backward and forward, trying to stretch the muscles that were forming knots in his neck the density of molybdenum. He closed his eyes hard. And for a split second saw that man's face again, floating around the inside of his eyelids. Smiling.

Harvey gasped.

Nadine glanced at him disapprovingly.

"Getting more coffee, darling," he said. "To stay awake."

He went into the kitchen, put water on to boil, and took out the instant coffee, which Nadine kept in a container labeled "Ye Instante Cafe" in Old English script. She thought it was cute. Harvey thought it wasn't airtight, making the coffee go stale faster.

Harvey held the container out at arm's length, wondering what it would sound like smashing onto the tile floor, then decided it wouldn't be worth the ruckus.

He opened the silverware drawer and reached for a teaspoon. But lifting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the spoon triggered a spasm of pain in Harvey's lower back that froze him where he stood, gagging the scream that erupted deep inside him.

Harvey waited for the pain to subside, unable to do anything more than just wait, immobile, like a piece of sculpture: *Man Holding Teaspoon, Mouth Open in Agony.* He heard the teaspoon clunk onto the floor. Next thing he knew he was on the floor himself.

Harvey was on his back, knees bent slightly. He tried to roll over and stand up. Pain shot through his lower back again, pinning him down like a collector's butterfly. He heard a strangling sound from somewhere, and realized it was himself, fighting to breathe against the shock rippling up and down his spine.

Nadine called, "Did you say something, Harvey?"

"Please come here, Nadine."

"What?"

"I hurt myself."

"If you want to speak to me, Harvey, you'll have to come into the living room."

"*Nadine!*"

She appeared in the doorway as if leading an army, but stopped short at the sight of Harvey on the floor like a beached whale.

"You're lying on the floor," she told him.

"My back."

"Yes. You're lying on the floor on your back. When you ought to be studying. You have a test tomorrow."

"I threw my back out."

"How?"

"Picking up a teaspoon."

"People don't hurt their backs picking up teaspoons."

"It felt like something twisted out of place at the base of my spine. The pain was incredible. It starts again every time I try to move."

"This teaspoon?" she said, picking it up.

"Yes."

Nadine scrutinized the utensil. "My good silver?"

"You'd better call the doctor."

The woman who answered the doctor's phone said he was out of town, but that a Dr. Roebuck was covering for him, and he would call back immediately. Which he actually did. Dr. Roebuck told Nadine to take Harvey to the hospital emergency room by car or ambulance if the pain continued. He was at the hospital now, so he could be waiting for them.

Nadine thanked him and hung up.

She asked Harvey if it was really necessary to keep them up till all hours by going to the hospital. To say nothing of what it might cost, considering the criminally inadequate health plan offered by his current employer.

Harvey found that he could move without setting off pain spasms. But the movement had to be minimal, like shifting his arm a few inches to keep it from falling asleep, or lowering

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

one knee and raising the other. Getting into a car was out of the question.

As for an ambulance, Nadine pointed out what a to-do *that* would make in the neighborhood. "They'll all be asking me questions tomorrow, and offering sympathy, and frankly I'd rather avoid that." Nadine didn't associate with their neighbors here in Oak Leaf Terrace. ("I'm sure they're nice people," she would always say, "but not the kind I'd want for friends.")

"It's past midnight, Harvey. Why don't we just go to bed? You'll be all better in the morning."

"I can't make it to bed, darling. I'll have to spend the night here."

"On the kitchen floor?"

"It's where I happen to be. Not much I can do about it."

She sighed. "Can you at least study if I bring in the textbook?"

"I don't think so, Nadine."

"Could I have a blanket, darling?"

She threw a blanket over him, switched off the light, and left him alone. Harvey lay there listening to the hum of the refrigerator. It cycled off, and he noticed moonlight through the window, and after a while the moon itself moved into his line of vision.

He tried changing position, feeling that he couldn't stand to remain exactly as he was for another second, but the resulting pain gave him a victory of only inches

That was when he noticed the face floating outside the window. The same face he had seen on his computer screen. Now the man was tapping the side of his nose with his finger, like Santa Claus about to go up the chimney. Harvey jerked his head in shock. The resulting extreme pain made him black out.

When he awoke the figure was gone.

Harvey decided he had been dreaming. Then he thought how strange it was that lifting a spoon could have such extraordinarily painful consequences. All day long at work, he lifted generators, starting motors, and batteries.

Well, maybe Nadine was right about changing professions, but for the wrong reason. After a certain age you had to be careful, and computer programmers didn't lift anything heavier than bytes and bits. Whatever they were. Not that he didn't know, but he didn't *really* know. Bits and bytes weren't things you could pick up and examine for serial numbers or scratches.

The refrigerator cycled on again, blowing its warm breath against his face, almost as if something alive were in the room with him.

The next morning Nadine drove him to Dr. Roebuck's office. A nurse led them into an examination room, and Dr. Roebuck himself entered a few minutes later.

Tapping his nose thoughtfully. As a matter of fact, it was his very face

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that Harvey had been seeing.

"It was you!" Harvey said.

"What was me?"

"The face on the computer screen. And outside my window!"

"My face?"

"Smiling, just like you are now."

Nadine said, "My husband has a strange sense of humor, Doctor. Pay no attention."

"But I *did* see him! I'd recognize him anywhere!"

"Harvey, I didn't drive you down here through all that traffic just to—"

"Perhaps you'd better leave us alone, Mrs. Beeman," the doctor said, "while I examine your husband."

"Yes, of course, Doctor." She went out.

Dr. Roebuck laughed. "You must have been in terrible pain if you hallucinated a face like mine," he said.

"But my back happened after—"

"You know, if you keep insisting you've seen me before, I'll have to charge you for that visit. So let's just find out what's wrong with you. All right?"

He removed Harvey's shirt and seated him on the edge of the examination table. Dr. Roebuck pressed Harvey's back here, hammered it there, and probed it someplace else, each time asking if it hurt. It always did.

The doctor nodded sagely in the manner of doctors and sent Harvey down the hall for an X-ray. It was developed immediately (that is, within the hour, with Harvey lying on a cold plastic table, wearing nothing but a paper hospital gown.) Dr. Roebuck studied the X-ray and cheerfully announced to Harvey that there was nothing wrong with his back.

"You mean nothing that you can see."

The doctor explained that he meant there was nothing visibly broken, bent, pinched, or severed. Harvey's problem was mental. Was he worried about something?

"Well, I'm studying to be a computer programmer, and sometimes—"

"Great little things, computers. No, was thinking more in terms of marital problems. Everything O.K. between you and Mrs. Beeman?"

"Sure, " Harvey said.

"You're positive?"

"I guess so."

"Because if that were the source of your tension, I could cure you in a flash."

"You could? How?"

"Well, that's not relevant, is it? Since everything's fine between the two of you?"

"But if it wasn't. What would you do?"

"Kill her."

"Kill?"

"Kill her dead."

Obviously Dr. Roebuck was joking, in response to what he believed Harvey had been doing earlier. Harvey forced a smile. "Know any good hit men?" he reparteed.

"That's not the problem. The pro-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blem is diagnostic. Is she or is she not the source of your tension? Want to give it a little thought?"

"Well, I suppose you could say—'

"Of course you could!" Dr. Roebuck said, with a broad smile. "Don't you see, Harvey, your emotions are tearing you apart. Anxiety. Suppressed anger. Hostility. Frustration. And the source of all of these?"

The name flew from Harvey's lips. "Nadine!"

"You could divorce her, of course," the doctor said with growing enthusiasm. "But she'd get half of everything you own and will ever earn. Community property, unfortunately, is not conducive to relieving lower back pain."

"Besides that," Harvey said, "her brother, Elroy, would beat the living hell out of me if I tried to divorce Nadine. He once picked me up by my collar and shook me because I forgot a wedding anniversary."

"I know."

"How?"

"So you see, it's inescapable. Nadine has to be done away with."

The joke seemed to be going on an awfully long time. Harvey was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Doctor, what can we do about my back?"

"I thought we just settled that."

"I guess I'm not much in the mood for joking. I just want it to stop hurting."

"I see."

Harvey felt as if he had somehow insulted Dr. Roebuck.

The doctor scrutinized Harvey. "O.K. We'll give you tranquilizers. To relax your muscles."

As Nadine was driving them home, Harvey started to tell her about Dr. Roebuck's odd sense of humor. But she interrupted, expressing concern that Harvey might not be able to work for a while. She supposed that meant she shouldn't buy a certain very beautiful silk blouse.

Harvey said he had two weeks of sick leave coming and not to worry.

"Well," she said, "since I can't decide whether to get blue or red, I'll buy both blouses if you really think it won't be a problem."

The car went over a pothole that jounced Harvey enough to make him scream. Nadine ascertained that the scream was not in reaction to her two-blouse proposal, and drove the rest of the way with great care.

The muscle relaxant didn't work. After a week of taking a capsule every three hours, Harvey's back seemed at moments to be improved, until he made the mistake of rising from a chair faster than an octogenarian might, or turning his head in response to a question from Nadine about when he might feel well enough to return to work.

Harvey went to a masseur, a short man with large hands and larger breath, composed mostly of garlic. The masseur kneaded, pounded, and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

manipulated Harvey in so painful a manner that Harvey was convinced the results had to be benefical.

After two weeks of massage for one hour every day, Harvey felt much better. One morning he put on his work clothes with a light heart and a gratitude that forgave even garlic, grabbed the handle of his car door, and went rigid with pain.

"What are we going to do?" Nadine said, when after a while he felt able to endure her helping him back into the house. "You've been out of work so long they may fire you, and our savings get smaller every week. Do you ever think what this is putting *me* through? Look at the lines around my eyes, Harvey. They weren't there two months ago."

Harvey looked at Nadine's eyes. They seemed to be the coldest eyes he had ever looked into, outside of a visit some years before to a snake farm in Sarasota, Florida. Harvey apologized to Nadine and promised to be cured as quickly as possible.

Walter, the head of the automobile agency's service department, recommended a chiropractor, who had "done wonders for Marion's shoulder blades."

The chiropractor, who charged fifty-three dollars a visit, examined Harvey's X-rays, gently moved his limbs, poked his back, and said it was a shame that Harvey had endured so much pain before coming to him, since he treated and relieved this particular problem all the time.

After ten visits Harvey turned out to be his first failure. He was also the first failure of a faith healer recommended by a cousin of Nadine's, and an herbalist who sold then ninety-three dollars worth of something Chinese. Harvey spent most of his time in bed now, terrified of making unnecessary movements. One day Walter dropped by to say that the dealership had a part-time cashier's job available, if Nadine was interested.

Nadine thanked him, but said he needn't be concerned, they were doing just fine financially. After Walter left, she asked Harvey how he could possibly think she'd want to be a cashier.

"But you're so worried about our savings being eaten away."

"Frankly," she answered. "I wonder how much of your so-called 'back pain' is real, Harvey. You certainly seem to relish staying in bed all day and being served like some monarch of old."

This was a strange comment, since Nadine rarely served him, and when she did it was with a resentment so plain that any monarch of old would have chopped her head off on the spot.

"Has anybody ever located the trouble?" she went on. "A slipped disk? A pinched nerve? A dislocated vertebra? Anything at all that would back your claim?"

"Nadine, I'm in constant pain."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So you say."

"I'm not making this up!"

"Well, how do I know that? I mean, a teaspoon, after all!" she said, sniffling back tears. "All I hear about is your constant pain. Well, you *are* a constant pain, Harvey. I'm sorry. But that's the way I feel." She hurried out of the bedroom.

That afternoon Harvey gratefully felt himself slipping into sleep. He dreamed he was on a stage before thousands of people, all of whom were Nadine. He was wearing an ill-fitting tuxedo, and was seated at a piano, about to send his fingers crashing down onto the keyboard. Except it was a computer keyboard, and when his hands came down, a terrible shock of pain went through him.

He awoke, covered with sweat. He realized he had rolled over in his sleep, triggering the pain. The phone was ringing. He waited for Nadine, to answer, but apparently she was out. He let it continue ringing, afraid to move.

The phone went on interminably. Finally Harvey inched his hand out and answered. It was Dr. Roebuck, asking how he felt.

"Lousy," Harvey said.

"There's always one sure cure, you know."

"What's that?"

"We discussed it at your examination."

"Doctor, I don't have much of a sense of humor these days."

"And no wonder. But an accident could fix all that."

"What kind of accident?"

"A happy accident."

Harvey felt he was getting into deep waters. But they were also strangely enticing. Was this some kind of psychological therapy to relieve him of the tensions that were the source of his pain? It had to be. What else could Dr. Roebuck possibly mean?

"If you think my remedy is extreme," the physician said, "concentrate on imagining your wife's face for a moment."

Harvey did. He saw the cold eyes, the determined jaw, the smug expression. His body grew rigid with tension. Pain whipsawed up and down his spine.

When he was able to speak, Harvey said, "What kind of happy accident?" Play the game.

"That's not your problem. All I need is your consent."

"Sure. Go ahead."

A 1963 Dodge Dart traveling at great speed suddenly veered off the street, jumped the curb in front of Harvey's house, and hit Nadine as she was bending over to pick up the morning paper. She died instantly. The driver, an elderly woman named Mrs. Vesey, reported having a dizzy spell just before the accident, and remembered nothing from that point on. The Department of Motor Vehicles

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

revoked her license.

Harvey was in bed at the time of the accident, groggy after being kept awake most of the night by the throbbing in his lower back. At the sound of squealing tires and shattering glass (the Dodge Dart was finally stopped by an oak tree), he leaped from his bed to look out the window.

Harvey grabbed a robe and flung open the front door, only to stop short in his tracks as he realized what his body had just allowed him to do. He had just made a hundred different movements, any one of which should have incapacitated him. But he felt just fine.

He continued to feel like his old self through the funeral and later when he was back on the job, though he still hesitated occasionally before bending or lifting. But after a couple of months, he hefted car batteries, cylinder heads, and starting motors without second thought.

One day Dr. Roebuck called, asking Harvey to drop by his office for a final checkup. Harvey said there was no need, he felt wonderful, though the fact was that the sound of the doctor's voice made him almost physically ill. The doctor offered to come to Harvey's house if that was more convenient. Anytime at all.

Harvey didn't want to see him. But the doctor sounded so casual, so normal, that Harvey decided to go to his office and try to resolve the terrible confusion he had been living with.

• • •

"Back O.K.?"

"Never better."

"I told you it would work, didn't I?"

"It was an accident."

"A happy accident."

"I never really thought you meant—"

"You did, Harvey, and you gave your consent. And according to the rules—"

"But that's murder."

"That's medicine."

"How did you get the old woman to do it?"

"Gratitude. Don't you feel grateful to me?"

"No!"

Harvey wanted to run, tell somebody about this maniac. But, my God, he was as guilty as Dr. Roebuck! He bolted for the door. Dr. Roebuck's voice boomed out.

"We're not finished yet!"

"What do you mean?"

The doctor consulted a file folder.

"A certain patient of mine suffers excruciating migraine headaches, caused by her father's continual demands for attention. I want you to kill him."

"What?"

"Come on, Harvey, play the game. Someone did it for Mrs. Vesey. She did it for you. Now you're in position."

"You're crazy!"

Like Santa Claus going up the chimney, like the face floating in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

window that first night, Dr. Roebuck tapped his finger against the side of his nose.

And a shiver of pain rippled through Harvey's back. But worse, far worse than any physical sensation, was the thin edge of comprehension that wedged itself into his brain.

Dr. Roebuck scribbled something on his prescription pad, tore the sheet off, and extended it to Harvey.

"The gentleman's name and address."

"How do you do it?"

"How do you digest food?"

"Who are you?"

"A rather amateur sportsman, as a matter of fact."

"From where?"

"Don't waste time, Harvey. I have three more moves before my round is over, and it's a tight game."

Harvey reached for the sheet of paper.

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO SUBSCRIBERS ON THE MOVE

If you are planning a change of address please notify us as far in advance as possible, and allow six weeks for the change to become effective.

Be sure to give us both your old and new address, including the zip codes. Print clearly and, if possible, attach an old mailing label.

OLD ADDRESS
(attach label here if available)

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____
(please print)

NEW ADDRESS

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE,
Mercury Press, Inc., PO Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE GOBLIN ELEMENT

I have my faults. (Yes, I do. I insist!)

For instance, I am incredibly provincial in some ways. Although I am a pronounced Anglophile, I simply cannot get used to British spelling and pronunciation. I have heard them say "eevolution" and "deefecate," with long "e"s, on radio and television, and I invariably shout "evolution" and "defecate" at them, with short "e"s, and they never listen. I've heard them pronounce schedule "shedule" and glacier "glassier" and my turning purple doesn't help.

I brood about it. To me, "colour" and "honour" and "labour" are ridiculous. All those words clearly rhyme with "flour" and that's not the way you pronounce them. And I won't even mention "gaol," which has a hard "g," if ever a word had it.

Sometimes I get so uncharitable about it that I feel myself on the point of announcing publicly that if the British can't spell and pronounce the American language properly, they ought to make up a language of their own.

Just now, in fact, I finally said so —out loud — to myself, because there was no one else around.

I wanted to find out when the word "anemia" first came to be used in medicine, and so I turned to a book I have in my library and looked up "anemia" — a-n-e-m-i-a. It wasn't there. There was absolutely nothing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

between "androsterone" and "anencephalic," and I was flabbergasted. Anemia is a very common medical term and the book purported to deal with the origin of medical terms. How could it miss?

I turned away with a muttered "dear me." I think I may even have said something stronger, like "good gravy."

And then a little light went on in my skull. I got the book again and looked at the title page. It was put out by an American publisher but the compiler of the book was a Canadian. Aha! I looked up "anaemia," and there it was.

That book will never know how close it came to being thrown out. It was only the thought that it had been invaluable to me on a number of occasions in the past that kept it on my shelves.

The word, anemia, you see, comes from a Greek expression meaning "no blood." The "a" prefix ("an-" before a vowel) is a Greek general negation meaning "no," "none," "not" and so on, like the Anglo-Saxon "un" and Latin "non-." The rest of the word comes from the Greek "haima," meaning "blood," with the "ai" diphthong pronounced like a long "i."

The Romans used their own diphthong "ae" (also pronounced like a long "i") in place of the Greek "ai." Since English uses the Roman spelling, we think of the Greek words as "haema," and the derived word became "anaemia" rather than "anaimia."

In English, however, the pronunciation of the "ae" became a long "e."

It seems to me, then, that the changed pronunciation makes a simple "e" sufficient for the spelling, and that's why we write "anemia." The British, however, continue to write "anaemia." For similar reasons, we write "hemoglobin," "hemorrhage," "hematology," "hemophilia"and "hemorrhoid," while they put an extra "a" into every one of those. Since heaven is just, I'm sure it sides with us in this matter.

To be sure, when this essay appears in Great Britain, the spelling will be changed to suit themselves, but I refuse to be held responsible for any consequences that may befall them as a result.

Apparently, the word "anemia" first came into medical usage in 1829 to discribe various conditions where there seemed to be a deficiency of blood or, at least, of the red coloring matter of blood, so that the victim is unusually pale.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The red coloring matter of blood is "hemoglobin," and it is contained in the red corpuscles. Hemoglobin contains iron atoms, and iron atoms are not easy things to come by in food. The body conserves its iron well, however, so mostly that is not a problem. If one loses blood, however, through accident or through the agency of some thoughtful enemy, one naturally has trouble replacing the iron.

Young women have a particular problem because they lose blood each month when they menstruate, and it is they who most frequently suffer from "iron-deficiency anemia."

There are various other causes of anemia, however, since the manufacture of red blood corpuscles can go wrong in any of a number of ways, even when the iron supply is adequate. Some types of anemia are more likely to have serious consequences than others.

This brings us to a British physician named Thomas Addison (1793-1860). He is best remembered today because in 1855 he identified a serious disease marked by atrophy of the cortex of the adrenal gland. This disease, resulting from insufficiency of adrenal cortical hormones, is still known as Addison's disease today.

Before that, however, in 1849, he carefully described a form of anemia that seemed particularly serious and particularly resistant to treatment. For a while, it was known to be clear that a diagnosis of Addison's anemia was a sentence of death. All treatments failed and the victim invariably died. The disease therefore came to be called "pernicious anemia," where "pernicious" is from the Latin, having the meaning of "to the death."

Once the 20th century arrived, however, physicians became aware of vitamins (as I described in the previous two essays), and any noninfectious disease became suspect. A search began for some dietary deficiency that might account for pernicious anemia. The first hint at advance, however, came about through indirection.

An American physician, George Hoyt Whipple (1878-1976), was primarily interested in bile pigments, which are compounds that originate through the breakdown of hemoglobin.

The hemoglobin molecule contains a non-protein portion called "heme," which consists of a large ring made up of four smaller rings, with an iron atom at the center. The body gets rid of heme, when desirable, by breaking the large ring and excising the iron atom for future use. The broken ring, which is the bile pigment, is then disposed of.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It occured to Whipple that he might understand bile pigments better if he understood the details of the hemoglobin life-cycle. He therefore began, in 1917, to bleed dogs until they were decidedly anemic and then to try out various diets to see which would most rapidly lead to the rebuilding of the normal red corpuscle count.

Whipple found that a diet in which liver was prominent was more potent than any other in hastening the replacement of heme and of red blood corpuscles. In hindsight, this is not really surprising. Liver is very much the chemical factory of the body so that it is rich in vitamins and minerals (including iron). If anything is going to help in a pure nutritional way, liver is a likely choice.

Whipple was not working on pernicious anemia, but some thought his results might just possibly be useful in that direction.

Pernicious anemia had its very puzzling aspects. It might be a vitamin-deficiency disease, but if so, why did so few people get it? When someone was suffering from the disease, why was there often nothing remarkably imbalanced about his diet; and why did others with similar diets *not* necessarily get the disease?

The normal human being produces strong hydrochloric acid as part of the stomach's digestive secretions. The result is that the stomach's "gastric juice" is by far the most acid fluid in the body, and this helps with the process of digestion.(So acid is the gastric juice that biochemists have a difficult problem explaining how the stomach lining can endure such a constant acid bath — and sometimes it doesn't, as anyone with a stomach ulcer can testify.)

Oddly, though, the pernicious anemia victim invariably lacks hydrochloric acid, and this gives rise to the thought that there may be a disorder of digestion or absorption involved in the disease. It might be that even though the vitamin might be present in the food, the victim might be unable to make use of it. In that case, he might only be helped by an unusually large supply of the vitamin, so that while most would be wasted, some, by sheer force, would leak through.

So must have reasoned an American physician, George Richards Minot (1885-1950), and his co-worker, William Parry Murphy (1892-). In 1924, Minot was so impressed by Whipple's announcement of the efficacy of liver on anemic dogs, that he decided to try a liver diet on his pernicious anemia patients. He had absolutely nothing to lose.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He started feeding them liver in large quantities, and it worked! The pernicious anemia was halted and his patients not only stopped getting worse, they started getting better.

As a result, Whipple, Minot, and Murphy all shared the 1934 Nobel prize for physiology and medicine. After all, pernicious anemia was no longer a sentence of death.

The suspicion that there was both an external vitamin and some internal incapacity was elevated from a suspicion to a strong likelihood in 1936 by the work of American physician William Bosworth Castle (1897-). He showed that there had to be an "intrinsic factor," which aided the absorption of the vitamin.

We now know that the intrinsic factor is a glycoprotein (a protein molecule including a complicated sugar-like component) which must combine with the vitamin before it is absorbed. It is the lack of the intrinsic factor that is the real trouble, for the vitamin is required (as it eventually turned out) in extraordinary small amounts. Even if that small amount were not available in the diet, which is unlikely, bacteria in the intestines could form it in ample quantities (as they can form some other vitamins, too). Indeed, the feces of untreated pernicious anemia patients are rich in the very vitamin for want of which they are dying.

There is an important catch to the liver treatment. It worked, yes, but it was a life-sentence to liver-eating, and in substantial quantities, too. This was better than dying, one might suppose, but as time went on, it is understandable that patients couldn't help but begin to wonder if liver wasn't a fate worse than death.

If the treatment was to be endurable, the vitamin would have to be extracted from the liver.

The American biochemist Edwin Joseph Cohn (1892-1953) tackled the problem, but he labored under a great difficulty. Whenever he divided some liver preparation into two portions through chemical treatment, the only way he could tell whether the vitamin was in one portion or in the other was to try both on pernicious anemia patients and see which helped. In every case, it took a long time to decide definitely whether a particular fraction was helping or not.

Even so, in six years of labor, from 1926 to 1932, Cohn was able to prepare a liver extract that was very efficient in alleviating pernicious anemia. Relatively small quantities of the extract would do the trick,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and those patients who had the extract available to them were freed from the necessity of gobbling liver day after day.

Nevertheless, Cohn did not isolate the vitamin itself. That fell to the lot of the American chemist Karl August Folkers (1906-).

In 1948, he and his co-workers made the key discovery that certain bacteria required the pernicious anemia vitamin for growth. A vitamin has a certain role in the chemical machinery of a cell, and its absence causes many things to go awry. Some disorders are more noticeable than others, and we naturally focus on the noticeable. In the case of the human being, the most noticeable disorder following inadequate use of the pernicious anemia vitamin involves the formation of insufficient numbers of red cells. Still, just because a bacterium doesn't have red cells doesn't mean it doesn't need the pernicious anemia vitamin for other reasons. If it can make its own, fine; but if it can't, the vitamin must be provided in the nutrient mixture supporting the bacterial culture. If the vitamin is not provided, bacterial growth stops.

Folkers had found a bacterium that would grow only in the presence of the vitamin, and that meant that whenever vitamin concentrates from liver (or from anywhere else) were further fractionated, the location of the vitamin could be quickly determined by bacterial assays without ever having to bother the poor pernicious anemia victims. More and more concentrated preparations were obtained and, before the year was out, red crystals were isolated that were the vitamin itself; vitamin B_{12} as it was called.

There were several astonishing items concerning B_{12} that were determined once the vitamin could be dealt with directly. With respect to the daily requirement, it was the least of the B vitamins.

The daily requirement of the various B vitamins was in the milligram range. An adult male needs 20 milligrams of niacin per day, 2 milligrams of pyridoxin, 1.7 milligrams of riboflavin, 1.4 milligrams of thiamin and so on. To put it another way, if you had an ounce of niacin and an ounce of thiamin and if you helped yourself to your daily need each day, the niacin would last for nearly four years, and the thiamin would last for 55 years.

The recommended daily dose of B_{12}, however, is about 5 micrograms for the adult male, where a microgram is a thousandth of a milligram. If you had an ounce of B_{12}, you would have enough for yourself for 15,523 years (assuming, of course, that it didn't deteriorate on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

standing). That would be a lifetime supply for about 220 people. Under those circumstances, it might seem astonishing that there would be a shortage.

But then, there is a second unusual thing about B_{12}. The molecule is surprisingly large. It is built up, if my count is correct, of 181 atoms and has a molecular weight of 1358. That makes it roughly four times as large as the other B vitamins.

In fact, it is among the largest one-piece molecules in living tissue, and here you must understand what I mean by "one piece."

There are larger molecules by far in cells — starch, proteins, nucleic acids, rubber, and so on. What's more, chemists can form huge molecules in the laboratory — fibers, plastics and so on. In all cases, however, these giant molecules, with molecular weights in the tens and hundreds of thousands, are made up of strings of relatively small units — the units all being similar, or even identical — and the strings are easily broken apart into single units. Such giant molecules are "polymers."

B_{12}, however, is not a polymer. It can be broken up into fragments, but these fragments are unlike each other. It is therefore one piece.

Starch, protein, and nucleic acid molecules, when present in food, are too large to be absorbed as such and made use of. However, those molecules are easily split apart ("digested") into their small units. The units can then be absorbed into the body and there be put together again into giant molecules. This is not possible for B_{12}. It must be absorbed in one piece and its size makes that difficult. It needs intrinsic factor, which combines with it and, so to speak, pulls it in. Without that factor — pernicious anemia.

The large size and the intricate structure of B_{12} made it very difficult to work out the details. It was not till eight years after its isolation that its exact structural formula was elucidated and that victory was attained by an English biochemist, Dorothy Crawfoot Hodgkin (1910-).

Her specialty was working with x-ray diffraction patterns, which are produced when x-rays bounce off atoms. If the molecules in a preparation exist in random orientation, the x-rays bounce off in random directions, and if the resultant beam impinges upon a photographic film, there is a central dark spot on the negative surrounded by a haze that fades off symmetrically in all directions.

If, however, a crystal is used, the molecules within it are arranged regularly, so that the constituent atoms appear in regularly repeated

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

patterns (like those on wallpaper). The x-rays bounce off each of the repetitions, in the same direction, each bounce reinforcing the next. As a result, the photographic film will show a series of dots in particular symmetrical positions.

From the nature of the symmetry and from the separation of the dots, conclusions can be drawn concerning the position of various atoms within the molecule and, with that as a lead, the structure can be worked out. Naturally, the more complicated the structure, the more complicated the diffraction pattern, and the more difficult it is to work out the molecular structure.

Hodgkin had worked on the x-ray diffraction pattern of penicillin, for instance, and used a computer to help solve the problem. This was the first use of a computer in connection with biochemistry.

She then went on to B_{12} and again made use of a computer. After considerable unremitting work, she solved the problem completely and, in 1956, announced the precise structure of B_{12}. For this she received the Nobel prize in chemistry in 1964.

In order to understand the structure of B_{12}, let's go back to heme. As I said earlier, the molecule of heme is made up of a large ring, made up of four small rings. The small rings are of five atoms each (four carbon atoms and a nitrogen atom), and these small rings are attached to each other by one-carbon bridges. The result is what is called a "porphyrin ring."

The porphyrin ring, though apparently large and unwieldy, is a very stable arrangement of atoms and occurs commonly in nature. There are many varieties of molecules containing such a ring, since small atom combinations ("side-chains") can be attached here and there to the ring. Each different side-chain, or each different arrangement of side-chains, produces a new compound.

When a porphyrin with the proper side-chains in the proper arrangement contains an iron atom in the center of the ring, the result is heme, an essential component of hemoglobin. We couldn't live without it.

Many forms of life don't have hemoglobin, but they must have iron-porphyrins just the same, for these are also present in compounds called "cytochromes." Cytochromes make it possible for cells to make use of molecular oxygen in extracting usable energy from organic molecules. All cells that make use of oxygen (the vast majority of all cells that exist) must have cytochromes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

When a porphyrin with a somewhat different set of side-chains has a magnesium atom at the center, it is chlorophyll rather than heme. Chlorophyll is a universal component of all green plants (which are green because of the chlorophyll they contain). It is chlorophyll that makes it possible for plants to utilize the energy of sunlight in such a way as to manufacture complex organic compounds. The entire animal world (ourselves included) depends for its energy supply on the organic compounds thus built by plants.

Magnesium-porphyrin compounds are, therefore, as essential to the vast majority of all cells, as iron-porphyrins are.

B_{12} has a molecule that is built about a ring system that is *almost* a porphyrin. The ring system is made up of the four smaller rings of five atoms each, but there are only three one-carbon bridges connecting the small rings. The fourth bridge is missing so that two of the rings connect with each other directly. The result is a lopsided "corrin ring."

The corrin ring has side-chains, some quite complicated, at almost every available atom. What is most surprising, however, is the central atom. It is not iron and it is not magnesium. At this point, then, let's shift to another part of the story.

Several centuries ago, copper miners in Germany were occasionally annoyed at finding a blue rock that looked as though it were malachite, an ore that yielded copper, but wasn't. This other blue rock, treated as malachite, would yield no copper and, indeed, sometimes yielded vapors that made the miners sick. (The ore contained arsenic, it was eventually found out.)

The miners came to a natural conclusion. The blue rock was copper ore that had been enchanted by a spirit with a warped sense of humor. There were mischievous Earth-spirits in German folk-lore called "kobolds." (This is equivalent to the "goblins" of English folklore, and, indeed, both "kobold" and "goblin" may trace back to the Greek "kobalus"). The miners, therefore, called the false ore "kobold."

This ore was investigated by the Swedish chemist Georg Brandt (1694-1768) and, in 1742, he extracted a metal from it that was not copper. On the contrary, it resembled iron a good bit, even to the point of being attracted (weakly) by a magnet. It was not iron, however, since, for one thing, it did not form a reddish-brown rust.

Brandt kept the name for it that the German miners had given it, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it had gained a slightly different spelling — "cobalt." Because of this name, which it has kept ever since, cobalt can fairly be called the "goblin element" if one wants to be dramatic, and, for the titles of these essays, I sometimes like to be dramatic.

Cobalt has come to be very useful on forming many alloys, but has it any function in living tissue?

In general, living tissue is mostly water, but if the water is removed, the dry material remaining behind can be analyzed. It turns out that carbon makes up about half the weight of the dry material.

This is as it should be. All "organic compounds" (so-called because they were originally associated with living organisms) are made up of molecules containing carbon atoms in combination with oxygen and hydrogen and, frequently, nitrogen. These four types of atoms, taken together, make up about 88.5 percent of the dry material of mammalian tissue.

There is also a little sulfur and phosphorus in proteins, a lot of calcium and phosphorus in bones, sodium and chlorine ions dissolved in the body fluids, a bit of magnesium here and there, and, of course, iron in the red blood cells and cytochromes.

Add all these together and you end with well over 99 percent of the weight of dry matter. It is then easy to dismiss the rest as meaningless.

However, once vitamins came into the consciousness of biochemists, they realized the importance of trace quantities. Might not some elements be necessary to life in trace quantities, too? If so, that less than one percent of the dry weight might include tiny quantities of elements that were, nevertheless, essential to life.

One way of checking for trace elements on tissue is to dry it and burn it thoroughly, leaving behind a small quantity of ash to be analyzed. Small quantities of a variety of elements are invariably found, but that raises an important question. Are the elements there because they are part of important, even vital, molecules, or are they there just because there is always a small amount of contaminating matter in food?

When we eat, we are bound to pick up some of every element there is. Undoubtedly there are a few atoms of gold wandering about in our body, but that doesn't mean that gold is an essential component of living tissue and, as far as we know, it isn't.

The presence of an "essential trace element" becomes more likely if it is always present in all ash derived from tissue. It becomes even more

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

likely if an animal is kept on a diet chemically free of that element and appears to suffer as a result. The best evidence of all, however, is to find that the element in question is an essential part of a molecule that is known to be necessary to life in trace amounts.

In the middle 1920's, cobalt was being found in the ash derived from living tissue, but, for ten years or so, this was dismissed as just a case of contamination.

In 1934, however, animal nutritionists were concerned with a disease that produced anemia in sheep in various regions of the world. The addition of iron compounds to the feed did not help.

But then an iron-free preparation from a mineral called limonite was found to do the trick. The preparation was carefully analyzed, and its various components, in pure form, were added to the sheep feed, one at a time. Before long, it turned out that pure cobalt chloride, added to the feed in small quantities, would cure the disease. It seemed that cobalt might be essential to life for sheep and, it was later discovered, for cattle, too.

However, sheep and cattle are ruminants, and it might be that cobalt is only useful in that special case and is not needed by non-ruminant organisms such as human beings.

But then came the news, after the structure of B_{12} had been worked out, that at the center of its corrin ring was a cobalt atom and that the B_{12} molecule would not work without that atom. Since organisms can not stay alive without B_{12}, it follows that cobalt, though present in excessively tiny traces, is essential to life.

To cobalt, by the way, is attached a cyanide group which, however, is too tightly held to do us harm, and is present in quantities too small to do us harm even if it were not tightly held. For that reason, B_{12} is now called "cyanocobalamin."

The question of how anything can be needed in such small quantities, and yet not be dispensed with altogether, will be taken up next month.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Keith Roberts, who has contributed a variety of fine SF and fantasy stories (most recently "Sphairistike," February 1984), returns with a tale about the relationship between a writer and a radio broadcaster and a Christmas party where things are not exactly what they seem...

Richenda

BY

KEITH ROBERTS

I

The first time I arrived at the EBC, it seemed I'd scarcely closed my eyes.

I'd heard a lot about the place, of course, but none of it actually prepared me for the reality. It's a tall, narrow-shouldered building just off the reconstituted Covent Garden, the plaza with its screaming rock bands and artistic cobbles. Inside, though, it sprawls and spreads; there's room after room, from some of which on that first visit were emerging the far from plaintive strains of that same musical disease. There was a reception desk, lost in the fastness, staffed by a bored, faintly menacing security man and surrounded by packing crates, piles of wood-wool, and unidentifiable odds and ends of studio machinery. Farther on I passed a pair of elderly part-assembled thirty-five-mil mechs. I wondered vaguely, stepping over a metallic-green chain guard, what the devil use they could find for them. And where they'd been liberated from, anyway. It seemed English Broadcasting had by no means forgotten their piratical beginnings.

I was puffing a bit by that time and getting faintly worried. A major shunt on the M4 had blocked the traffic up nearly to Maidenhead, so the coach had taken the best part of three hours merely to crawl to the terminus. I'd been lucky with the tube, though; I made it with just two minutes to spare.

By comparison, first-floor reception was unexpectedly grand. I watched the two figures walk toward me, feet lisping on the ballroomlike floor. Both wore knee-length boots,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the taller a gold-green brocade-effect dress. The high windows backlit their hair, chestnut and deep brown, made halos of more gold. I swallowed a bit. Absurdly enough for one who's spent his life flogging his ego round the literary world, I'm frightened of first meetings; and scared witless at the sight of a microphone. But I was committed to this; Graham, my editor at Fletcher and Hardstone, had looked sardonic when I'd started to hem and haw, but I'd forestalled him. Only the week before, I'd resurrected the old crack about publishing under a cloak of secrecy, so I'd nodded hastily. Of course I'd do the interview, I'd do anything they could get me onto. Even the EBC.

The elder of the women held her hand out. "Hello, Keith, nice to meet you," she said. "I'm Marge Banks. This is my presenter, Richenda Steuart."

I suppose I made the usual polite noises. I wasn't listening to myself at the time. If there's anything guaranteed to hook me through the lip, it's what I call Casual Elegance. Like a full, suede skirt; a belt cinched round a tiny waist; a little white casually buttoned shirt. Plus a vivid, heart-shaped face; dark, tilted-almond eyes; tumbling, shoulder-length hair. *"Und das Schiff mit acht Segeln und mit fünfzig Kanonen wird beflaggen den Mast.* ..." I'd have beflagged anything for this Pirate Jenny; but I suppose that was mere association.

I said. "'Richenda?'"

She was already pushing open the big swing doors at the side. She said, "Norfolk. Quaker." She grinned. "Neither of which I am. ..."

"We even found a studio free," said Marge. "Rare, for this building." She pushed open another door, furnished above with a red lamp in a wellglass. She said, "Smoke?" She handed me a chipped and ash-stained saucer. "Sorry about that," she said. "It's the best the company provides."

"That's all right," I said. "I've got one just like it at home." I looked round. The place was tiny; twelve feet square at maximum, maybe fourteen. And the company had struck again; the egg cartons on the ceiling, the old-type acoustic tiling round the walls. Above a little table a big black mike hung from a stand; there was a control console, to one side tape decks with ten-inch horizontal spools. No viewing panel, no brightly lit control room beyond; instead, the producer clicked switches for herself, glancing across at the mike. She was already taking levels.

Richenda swooshed her skirt under her, sat down facing me, hotched her shoulders to be comfortable. My face changed, and I knew I had to say something fast. "Great Scott," I asked, "what are you both doing in Steam? The TV people are only up the road."

It could have been right or wrong. Mercifully, it was right. They glanced at each other, and Richenda grinned

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

again. She said, "We're working on it." She picked up a copy of my book. Three or four places were marked with slips of paper. Marge dropped her hand, pressed for *Record*; and the presenter's face changed, became even more vivacious. Her voice lifted, too, to the bright, tinkling delivery I knew so well.

I did my best with her first question, wishing I hadn't had the cigarette. It had dried up what spit glands remained. The next wasn't quite so bad — I'd second-guessed it, anyway; I even had time to try and pace myself — not gabbling, but not those nasty little pauses, either, where you suck your teeth and smack your lips and do all sort of things the mike picks up gleefully. I was signaling the end of phrases, too — not that the presenter needed it; she was far too professional. She was sensing them, moving back in smoothly.

Marge was standing arms, folded, listening and watching, but still with one eye on the VU meters. Two questions later she nodded, and Richenda wound up with her standard polite little "Thank you."

I sat back, feeling the adrenaline start to go away. "Not too bad, I suppose," I said hopefully. "Only one cough and spit in twenty minutes."

The producer seemed genuinely pleased, though. "First-rate," she said. "You gave us all we needed. Won't be able to use everything, of course." She picked up her copy of the book. "Are you antireligion, by the way?" she said. "I should have asked before."

Richenda glanced at her notes. "Sorry, Marge," she said. "Do you want me to put it in?"

The producer nodded, cued her; and the dark girl's face lit up for the final time, the body language began again. Two minutes later she rose. "Sorry," she said, "I've got to dash. Nice to have met you." She cinched her belt in as she left; and I'd thought she was slim before.

Ten minutes later I was wandering down toward Drury Lane. They'd certainly wasted no time; it was still barely 11:15. I paused outside my publishers', waved through the glass street door. The lass in reception grinned and released the security catch. Graham seemed pleased to see me; but then I'd warned him I might be dropping by. We chatted for a while, then headed back toward the Garden. We collared corner seats in my favorite pub, and he set a round up. My first pint never touched the sides.

"My God," I said, "I needed that."

He raised his eyebrows and signaled to one of the barmen. "You sound as if you've been in World War III," he said. "It was only the Eeb."

I started on the second glass. "More like a bit of both."

"That bad?"

"No," I said. "Fine, as a matter of fact. They said they liked it, anyway." I lit a cigarette. "Crazy place, though,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I said. "Thought they'd got the brokers in for a minute."

He grinned. "it's always like that," he said." he said. "An air of vigor and impermanence. Who was doing the show?"

"Marge Banks was producing," I said.

The grin became worse. "And?"

"Richenda Steuart was presenting. I still don't believe her."

He shook his head. "It's the artist in you. All you writers are alike."

"You're a writer," I said. "When you aren't chopping my ruddy stuff about."

"Ah," he said solemnly. "But I've got responsibilities."

"So have I," I said. "Beer, fags, and tax." I considered. Years back, before he'd even got his present job, Graham had told me that if he ever wanted to catch me, he knew just the bait. And it wouldn't be a gourd and sugar lump, either. "She's special, though," I said. "Isle of Gramarye and that." I drained my pint.

He followed suit. He'd always had a first-rate capacity for ale; I sometimes think it's the major thing we have in common. "There're pretty girls all over," he said casually.

"Agreed," I said. I stubbed the cigarette. "You forget, though," I said. "Like listening to hi-fi, then hearing a real band. If you want the goods, you've got to come to London. Or go to Dublin."

"Ah," he said, "the Celtic fringe. How's it coming on?"

"Better than it was. You got it scheduled yet?"

"Better finish it first," he said. "Otherwise, my board are going to have some very witty things to say. All of which I shall certainly have heard before." He drank ale. "Ever thought about television?"

I shuddered. "After this morning, I reckon even radio's a bit too warm."

"Book-signing sessions, then," he said decisively. "We'll fix one for next time."

I made a face. "Great," I said. "Sit round all day and hope somebody buys something. Hey, that was my shout."

"Risk you take," he said. He raised his glass. "Have it on the firm. Don't see half enough of you, anyway."

A few days later I had a call from my agent. He said the last book had sold quite well, there'd be some money for me in the post. Which is always nice to know, albeit surprising. He asked how the interview had gone, and I said fine; then he hedged a bit, which isn't like him. It was obvious something else was coming; finally he said, "This presenter. Richenda Steuart. You know her well?"

"To my eternal sorrow," I said, "I met her only the once. And that was for only about twenty minutes. Why? They scrapped the interview?"

"No," he said, "nothing like that. Far as I know, anyway. It's funny, though. You leave any material with them?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"No," I said. "They'd got a couple of copies of *The Puppet Makers*, but the copies were there already."

"Nothing else at all?"

"Why should I?" I said. "That was all they were interested in. Look, Alistair, what goes on?"

"Nothing," he said. "Don't suppose it is, anyway." He muttered something about coincidences being bound to happen. I waited.

"Look," he said finally, "I had a thirty thousand worder in the other day. Historical. Not bad for a first try. Difficult to place, of course. Outside the women's mags. And they're a bit clogged at the moment."

"Whose was it?" I said.

There was a little pause. Then he said, "Richenda Steuart."

A lorry passed. In the quiet — I was up at the caravan — the sudden noise was startling. I put it out of my mind, drifted back to what he was saying. I said, "I still don't see what's so special about that."

He made his mind up, finally. "You know that thing you did for Tony Marsham? *The Spaniard and the Lady?*"

"Aye."

He said, "It was a paraphrase of it. Dead copy, here and there. Even the curtains were in the same places."

It didn't seem the sort of thing she'd do. I felt a twinge of disappointment. I said, "So she got a look at it somehow."

"No way," he said. "First thing I did was get onto Tony. Said he'd never heard of her, doesn't know anybody from the Eeb. And he's got the only copy. Apart from the one that's here."

We didn't seem to be getting anywhere. "So somebody nicked some proofs," I said. "Due to start this week, isn't it? She read the first part and fudged the rest. Damned silly trick, though."

He sighed. "That's just the point," he said. "There aren't any proofs. They've put publication back to August; I was wondering how to break it to you."

After he'd rung off, I sat staring out the windows; at the old, dying fruit trees in the little orchard, the pub across the field, the extension line swaying slightly in the early evening breeze. I remembered I didn't have an extension line to the van; but it didn't seem to matter at the time. I was feeling put out. I'd succeeded in getting the fairy creature out of my mind; now she was back with a vengeance. I flicked through the stack of quartos on the table. But I didn't want to do any more on the *The Plague Stone*. I didn't want to write about a woman with the touch of death. I wanted to write about a pair of dark brown, almond-tilted eyes; a big mike hanging over a desk; a girl who cinched her belt tight as she rose to leave. In the end I gave up and went across to Nobby's for a beer.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Next morning I did something a bit unusual; I destroyed a finished draft. Least it was finished but not fair-copied. It was only short, but it was nasty. I'd been wondering about it for a week or two, though why I finally decided to dump it just then, I had no idea. Overall I didn't seem to be getting on too well, so I drove back into the valley.

Two days later the studio phone rang. It was Alistair again, sounding puzzled. "Look," he said "maybe a silly question, but did you ever do a story called *The Vultures*? And not send it in?"

"Yes," I said. "I tore it up the other day, though. Just because everybody else dishes the dirt, that's no cause for me to." Then it registered. I said, "How the hell did you know?"

He was sounding gruff. "Because it turned up this morning," he said. "No author name, just a London postmark. Thought it rang like one of yours. Couldn't really be sure, though."

I held the handset out and looked at it. Then I put it back to my ear. "Why not?" I said.

A little pause. Then he said, "Because it was torn in pieces."

This time there wasn't any question. There'd only ever been one copy of that story, and it had gone on Nobby's bonfire along with the rest of the weekend's junk. I knew because I'd put it there myself. I thought about it for a while, then decided the best thing I could do was get stuck into some work. The illustration contract had come in; Canadian Indian legends, for a kids' book. I hadn't really wanted it, but I'd promised a pal of mine. Now it seemed a godsend, though. I worked the rest of the day. Managed to avoid too many almond-shaped eyes. Even on the jackrabbits.

The respite didn't last, though. Next day I had a letter from the EBC. It was Richenda. Sorry, but they wanted some more material. Would I consider going back up?

I sat and tapped my fingers and let the lorry noise build and fade away again. Since we became a trunk road, I've found I can do that. I rang her number, but she wasn't in the office. I gave my message to a cheerful-sounding secretary instead, and went up next day. In for a penny, in for a pound.

It seemed again two scenes were joined without intermission. I sat on the same settee and glanced through the programme sheets fanned out on the same glass-topped table. I watched the same figure walk toward me. On her own this time.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but Marge was called away. It won't take more than a few minutes, though. Will you come with me?"

At least it was a proper studio this time. What I think of as a proper studio, anyway. She consulted the notes

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she carried, pushed her hair back, took her cue from next door, and smiled. As far as I could recall, the questions were virtually the same as the last. At least I'd thought up some better answers, though.

I saved the cigarette till afterward, having been wised up. I offered her one, but she shook her head. "Thanks," she said, "I don't."

I put the match in the inevitable chipped saucer. I said, "I didn't know you were doing a bit of writing on your own."

She glanced up. "Yes," she said, "I've been trying for years. I've never had much luck, though." She looked at her watch and seemed to panic suddenly. "Sorry," she said, "I've got to fly. Thank you very much." She produced an envelope from one of her capacious pockets. She said, "I fixed some exes for you. Covered last time as well. Can you find your own way out?" She ran for the door and was gone. This time she didn't bother tightening her belt.

An odd thing happened. The walls of the room seemed to flicker, threatened to black out entirely. I put it down to stress. Then the engineer put his head round the door. "Sorry," he said, "we're booked again now." So I got up and walked away.

Time was dilated. Or contracted. I worked solidly on *The Plague Stones*. But I couldn't seem to make it run. Finally I bundled up what I'd done, statted it, and banged it off to Alistair. I've always said the three things a writer needs are a good agent, a good editor, and a good critic. In his time he'd been the lot.

He was on the phone next morning. I thought the post must have improved, but the new stuff hadn't arrived. Instead he came straight to the point. "I've had a manuscript in," he said. "Leastways a synopsis and specimen chapter. Thing called *The Plague Stone*. Historical."

I said, "Content?"

He said, "Word for word this time. To the last full stop. We've got to sort this out."

"Yes," I said. "But I'll do the sorting for the moment. I'm the one who's being got at. If anybody is."

I perked some coffee, sat, and lit a cigarette. Fine to suggest doing the sorting. You had to make sense of it yourself, though, first. And at the moment there didn't seem to be a sight.

The traffic noise buzzed again, and faded. I looked at my desk. To one side was the usual slush pile; on top of it, as paperweights, two or three hardbacks. The lowest of the stack was *Puppet Masters*.

I stubbed the cigarette. I was trying to remember just how those copies had got to the EBC in the first place. Almost certainly they'd gone across my desk; because Graham's people had slipped up for once, the author copies and Alistair's had all come to me. I remembered I'd cussed

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a bit at the time; next day I'd reparceled half and sent them on. Then somebody had referred a couple to the Eeb. Alistair, or Fletcher and Hardstone?

I rang him back. "Alistair," I said, "those *Puppet Masters* copies for the EBC. Who sent them in?"

"I did," he said promptly. "They called me, said they were interested in doing a review for 'Caliban.' I told you at the time, don't you remember?"

"Just checking," I said. He asked why I wanted to know, but I didn't commit myself. Mainly because I couldn't. I poured another coffee instead, thought some more. So the copy Richenda had worked from had lain on my desk for at least a day. Under it would have been the stack of typescript. What would have been in it? *The Vultures* had certainly been finished Plus the specimen chapter and synopsis. But what about *The Spaniard*? An intermediate draft had probably been kicking about, because I'd taken a month or two over the deadline to finish. So the three pieces that had been esped had all at one time lain physically close to that copy of *Puppet Masters*. Two had been finished, one had not. I'd made a lot of changes, cut masses of material out. What had appeared at Alistair's, I was willing to bet, had been my second draft. Which explained why she hadn't been word-perfect.

Explained? That was a nice word.

I tuned in to the "Caliban" program that evening. Richenda wasn't on, but I listened anyway. They were doing a quick job on Tennyson as part of their Great Poets series. One line stuck in my mind. *"I the heir of all the ages, in the foremost rank of Time."* If *she was* the heir of all the ages, it stood to reason she'd have all knowledge. A sort of reason, anyway. Then I started wondering why I should have thought of her like that. She was the Ultimate Woman, of course, but then, she'd always been there. As she fades, she regenerates — which is why she's immortal. The Venus from the ashes. I thought about Graham's comment again. The gourds and sugar lumps. But that didn't help, either. If it was wrong to love beauty for its own sake, I'd been sinning most of my life.

I fetched a bottle of single malt I'd been keeping for a special occasion. Not that this exactly warranted it. Later I wondered where four hours had gone to. I rang the station anyway. I don't know why; I don't think I was reasoning too well. But it didn't make any odds. All I got was a security guard.

I caught her next morning. Or it seemed to be next morning. I was faintly surprised when she came on the line. I said, "Richenda, there's something I want to talk about."

"Yes," she said. "I thought there might be."

I hesitated. "What's it going to be?" I said. "Lunch or dinner?" And

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

here, I thought, is where I get the kick in the teeth to end them all.

She paused as well. Then she said, "Dinner. Can you make it today? I don't want it to wait, either."

I took the afternoon coach.

At least they'd tightened up their security. I was even given a lapel tag. But after all, the big embassy siege was only just over.

She was wearing the same full, lovely skirt, the same frank little blouse. So no time had passed at all, really. I took her hands, and reception started to flicker and flash. So many things seemed coming together. In part she was the daughter I'd never had, in part — but there were so many parts. I frowned. I felt bulky, in the way. But she had already taken my arm.

"Come on," she said. "There's a lift. We needn't trail all the way to the front." She was carrying a little jacket, and a bag was slung from her shoulder. She said, "Have you been busy?"

I said, "Fairly. You?"

"Pretty hectic," she said. "But then, it always is up here. Good night, John." The lift doors whiffled closed. She pressed for *Ground*.

We walked into the Lamb. Fortunately the place wasn't too busy, for once. She asked for gin and Italian. We found a corner table. She said, "Did you hear the program?"

I said, "Yes. I thought you did me proud."

She said, "It was a very good book. We're waiting for your next."

"You won't like it," I said. "Not your style, really."

She looked up with those dark, tilted eyes. She said. "Why don't you try us and see?"

I swallowed. I was wishing I'd asked Graham to back me, or Alistair. My throat was drying again, as if there were a microphone hung between us. A man in a business suit and bright-striped shirt pushed by to the corner. I though he looked at me oddly. A minute or so later, he shoved past again. He left his briefcase where it was, and I thought I saw her shiver. She said, "I wonder how good the security is in here?"

"It's all right," I said. "He's only gone back to the bar."

"It isn't being killed," she said. "It's being maimed. I'm terrified of being deaf." She hesitated. She said, "Can I have a cigarette?"

I lit it for her. Suddenly it seemed she was more nervous than I was.

There was an Indian restaurant I knew just down the road. We walked to it. The Garden was beginning to fill now with the evening trade. She asked for tikka starters, got stuck in. For all her slightness she had a healthy appetite. I poured her a glass of wine. It seemed there was a lead weight, pulling. Maybe it was all experience; I couldn't say. I just knew I shouldn't be there. I said, "Why me?" and she glanced up quickly.

She said, "We like your work."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Over the main course I said, "That wasn't what I meant."

She said, "No. I know." Unexpectedly, a tear welled from one eye. She dabbed at it. "It's the machine," she said. "I couldn't help myself. I had to know. If it was really. ..."

"Machine?" I said, and she swallowed.

"Yes," she said. "I couldn't believe it myself. Not at first. But it's ... it is true. I know it's true because you came. It was your work, wasn't it?"

I said, "What machine?"

She shook her head miserably. "*The* machine. There's only one. I'm the only one who knows."

I said, "I think you'd better explain yourself."

She put her fork down. "C.P. made it," she said. "After he gave us the ship. You know he was a genius. That's why he was worth millions. ..."

I nodded. Carrera, the computer whiz-kid. The whiz-kid to end them all, or so I'd been told. Who'd also been a champion of free enterprise; the coaster he'd donated, which they'd moored in the Medway, had been the start of the EBC. But I was still no nearer.

"This machine," I said. "Can it see through walls? What range has it got? Could it reach the moon?"

"It doesn't have to," she said. "It's only inches. The thickness of a sheet of paper. It ... I don't know how it works. But if there's a book, and something else was near it once ... you can adjust it. Read all the rest. He said things impregnate each other. Like sending out rays." She wagged her hands. The body language again; and a ghostly mike was looming. Only now it was her in the hot seat. I should have left her where she was; in her little room, with the egg trays and the tiles. You don't question a force of nature; not if you want to sleep afterward. But I'd gone too far to stop.

"How do you tune it?" I said.

"There're dials," she said. "It prints out. Like a photocopy. But it doesn't print what's there. Only what used to be. *Your manuscripts*...."

Unaccountably, I was angry. Though whether with her or myself, I simply couldn't say. "Psychometry by computer," I said. "Great. Think what it'll do for the historians. The lost books of Aristotle. All those Bach autographs. Gernsback's little green men. ... I never heard such poppycock," I said. "I expected better from you."

Amazing how fast she crumbled. I'd taken it all from her, you see. Her microphone, her tapes, her lovely, suave producer. She put her face in her hands and started to sob. Really sob. I said, "*Richenda*. ..." I tried to take her wrists, but she snatched away.

"Damn you," she said. *"Damn, damn, damn. ..."* She ran for the ladies' room at the back. The door slammed behind her

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I put my hands on the table. Then I pushed the plates away. Nobody was in the mood for any more gosht. Or madras. I sat and heard the tinkling sitar tape. I lit a cigarette.

The manager was hovering anxiously. I looked at him. "It's all right, Ravi," I said. "It's OK."

He said quietly, "Coffee, sir?" and I shook my head.

"No, thanks," I said. "Can I have the bill?"

She came back. Walked the length of the little restaurant as she had walked across reception, stood looking down. She said, "I'll show it to you, if you like."

"Show me what?"

She said, "The machine. Then you'll understand."

I said, "I think I'm already looking at it." I put her coat round her shoulders, got up, and held the door.

Her flat must have been close, because again it seemed no time elapsed at all. Nice little place it was, too, in the basement of a tall old Victorian-looking building. She moved round quietly, clicking on wall lights. She said, "Drink?"

I shook my head. I said, "No, thank you."

She walked through to the loo. I stood looking round. Simple furnishings, but with something of her elegance. TV, of course; big, comfortable-looking easies; macramé wall hanging — an owl with big, staring eyes. A cocktail cabinet; sleek, purposeful-looking hi-fi. Framed twenties fashion plates, a Chagall print, the Picasso protrait of Bardot. An open door showed her bedroom. Plain quilt, no big, gungy toys; none of those *clichés* at all.

She came back. She said, "It's through here."

There was a little utility room. In it stood the machine. A word processor, with integrated printout facility. Beside it lay the copy of *Puppet Masters.*

I picked it up and looked at it. I said, "You're the psychometrist, aren't you?"

She nodded. She said dully, "And a bit more besides."

I said, "Richenda, why did you spin me such a yarn? Just to get me round here? Why me?"

She clenched her fists. She said, "I had to tell somebody. And after the book ... I thought you'd understand."

I shook my head. I said, "I'm no good to you, love. I've had my life. Or most of it. What did you want, a father figure?"

She looked at me. She said, "Don't we all? Sometime or another?"

I put the book aside, walked to her. I stood looking down. Quite suddenly, I wanted to touch her breasts. Not from lust; but because they were warm and firm. And to comfort her. I did no such thing, of course. I took her shoulders; but the explosion was still intense. White and flaring. It woke me.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

II

I sat up. I was sweating. Also I was annoyed. When you start dreaming in structured sequences, it means there's something wrong with the state. If not with you. Then I started sweating worse. Because I wasn't in the right place; the room was as big as my flat put together. Light coming at the wrong slant, windows different, no door where the door should be. So it was going on after I'd opened my eyes. I'd had problems like that before. Just the odd time.

I lay back, tried to let things adjust. After a while I remembered. The phone call, packing, and getting on the road. It was an invite I couldn't turn down. I'd heard a bit about Lady Marjorie's Christmas parties, and I knew she was choosy about her guests.

I tried to remember how I'd first met her, but I couldn't. Not at the time, at least. It seemed she'd always been there. Like a force of nature. I tried to remember where I'd heard that phrase as well, and gave it up.

Lady Marjorie. It's funny, but when you think of a lady, you usually think of dowagers with large corsages. Leastways I do. She's not like that, though; it doesn't describe her at all. She's ... but I won't even bother. You can never make anybody else see another human face; not with words, at least. There're limits to what words can do.

Her house was in the West Country. I can't be more specific than that. There were acres of tiled roofs, and big, twisty chimney stacks, and terracotta beasties gamboling and shambling all along the eaves. And an eighteenth-century Spanish bed with a headboard like a carving of the Surfer's Perfect Wave, and a little painting she kept tucked away, which she always swore was a Raphael. For my part, I couldn't say. I suffered four years as an art student, but that doesn't make you a dealer.

I thought about the house on the drive down. Preparing myself for the shock, perhaps. Because it was always there, *faint but definite*; the long roofline bow-backed, the frozen finials. I tried to remember how often I'd been down. But it seemed my memory was failing at all points.

I suppose I stopped and lunched somewhere; but that seems to be vague as well. The first image that impinged was the house itself. S—— But I said I wouldn't tell you where it was, didn't I? I saw the long, winding drive; leafless shrubs to either side; and beyond them the house: mellowed brick, dark eyes of windows staring. I pulled up, set the brake; and Her Ladyship was standing on the porch. She'd heard the sound of the car. She said, "Same place. I'll come round with you." So I drove to the stables — or what used to be the stables — nosed in beside the great central pillar, and switched off. She said,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Nice to see you. Glad you could make it."

I got out, ran round to open the door. I've heard it said that if a man opens a car door for a woman, one of two things is true: either it's a new car, or it isn't his wife. I sometimes think there's another way to look at it, though. It doesn't work with titles. Or beauty. Marge, I realized suddenly, had both.

She was wearing a lovely gold-green dress. And knee-length boots. She'd had her hair cropped, shorter than I'd have liked it; but the result was immaculate. She said, "Thanks," and gave me the standard peck on the cheek. Then she hugged me. She said, "Glad you could come." I looked round. It seemed to be warm, for Christmas.

I'd have got my things out of the boot, but she waved her hand. She said, "The hell with that. You can fetch them later. Or Ivor can bring them in." So we walked back to the house. On the way she folded her arms thoughtfully. She said, "Have a good trip down?"

"Not bad," I said. "That Salisbury bypass is a godsend." I glanced at her. She'd draped a little woolly round her shoulders.

She caught the look, and grinned. "I was talking to a friend the other day, she said. "He reckoned English-women work only in tweeds or casuals. Evening dress is great for the French."

I said, "They have the lack of figure for it," and held the door.

The other guests hadn't arrived, which was fine by me. I'm always nervous meeting new people; I like to do it in small doses. We sat in the Great Hall, roaring-warm already, and she got me a drink. I wondered if it was O.K. to smoke, but in a room that size it didn't make much odds. There were cigarettes on the table, anyway. Balkan Sobranies. I hadn't tried one since I was in my teens. I lit up. The authentic taste of Eastern European jockstraps.

I looked round. The minstrels' gallery was still blocked off; she'd been meaning to open it up for years, but she'd never got round to it. Reckoned if she did that, there'd be nowhere to hang her watercolors. And she didn't want them messed up, not after she'd had them cleaned. Did you know you can wash a watercolor? I didn't. Not till I found out from Marge.

I looked out the tall windows at the hills butting and mumbling at the sky. Center field was the big one: High Tor, they called it. The ramparts round it, the old earthworks, showed like bumps against the sweeping contours. There was something sensual about it. I remembered Leonardo, the patterns he found in water, plants, and hair.

Marge was talking, though. She said, "We've got some interesting people this year. Have you met Sammy Farnham?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I said, "*The* Sammy Farnham?" and she nodded.

She said, "He's got a big dig fixed up. Over at the castle. The Bristol folk are coming down. I heard Salisbury was showing a passing interest, too. Could be quite fun."

I considered. Ever since his discovery of the Coombe Hasset figure — a chalk carving even less inhibited than the Cerne Giant — Professor Farnham had been a TV celebrity. I said, "Has he got the usual backing?" and she nodded.

"Keep it under your hat, though," she said. "It hasn't been officially released yet."

I frowned. Something about this modern woman and the hill beyond the windows, something that needed to be said. I considered a fantasy: twin-tub washing machines and palisaded villages. I promptly rejected it. That's not the way to go, not if you want to stay solvent. "Marge," I said, "what is it?"

She said, "What's what?"

"The castle."

She shrugged. "Better ask Sammy. I've got no idea."

I said, "Who else will be coming?" and she glanced at me.

"One or two," she said. "Got a surprise for you, by the way. Richenda."

I said, "I was impressed then. What's she doing with herself these days?"

"Got a job in radio," she said. "Or so I heard. Those EB people, what are they?"

"English Broadcasting Company," I said. "The people who used to be pirates. Is that so, Marge? Is she really working there?"

She nodded. "Yes," she said. "Doing quite well, too. Leastways she was the last time I heard." She stubbed her cigarette. She said, "Another drink?"

"Too early for me," I said. "Yes, please." After all, bank holidays are bank holidays now. God opted out a long time back.

Later I fetched the stuff round from the car. Old Ivor whistled out when he saw me, but for once he was a mite too late. Marge showed me to my room herself. It was huge: big old marble fireplace to one side, ceiling-high wardrobes built into the alcoves, the bed tucked into a corner like an afterthought. The fire wasn't alight, but radiators were set round three walls out of four.

"They're not all on," said Her Ladyship. "But if you need any more, just twizzle the thing at the end. Damn. ... She dashed out, came back with a little metal wastebin. She dumped it under the big table that stood beneath the tall central window. "That's got you sorted," she said. "Can't have a room without a wastebin. Never seems complete."

I said, "I didn't bring the typer," but she merely shrugged.

"Lucky you're not a lithographer,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

she said. "Limestone comes heavy. That's a genuine Sickert, by the way." She pointed. "Loo's down the corridor," she said. "First on the left. Bathroom next door. Need anything else?"

I said, "No, thanks, I'll be fine."

She said — or I thought she said — "See you in a bit." But maybe I was wrong. Maybe English ladies don't speak that way at all.

I put my stuff away, what little I'd brought, walked to the windows. I stood looking out and down. I'd forgotten the Scots pines. Or maybe that was the first time I'd seen them. The evening light was touching their trunks, turning them to blazing orange. They gave their black heads a toss as well, in vintage Hardy fashion. Beyond, just visible behind tall hedges, were the vegetable gardens; I could see the roofs of the first two greenhouses. I craned my neck. To the left was a lawn marked out for croquet; I could still see where the irritating little hoops had stood. I remembered — or maybe it was a rogue image — folk clustered there in summertime, the mallets between their ankles. And arguing desultorily about the score. Richenda had been one of them, I was almost sure. Richenda as a child. I lifted my eyes. High Tor was looming, in the gathering dusk. Now Arthur's seat shall be my pall.

Sammy, the whiz kid archaeologist, had turned up by the evening. I hadn't known quite what to expect; curiously, though, I got on well with him. I'd always thought his TV image a bit too macho; but then, of course, he'd merely been fund raising. He'd brought his old professor with him, an amazing man with a Rasputin-type hairdo and knuckles a half inch wider than mine. And I'm not small. They got into an argument about hand axes that lasted from the entrée to the sweet. Sammy advanced a theory that the blade wasn't a blade at all; it had been bound into a shaft, so the things were really knobkerries. The prof retaliated by sniffing, and spilling his wine. I thought Sammy looked put down; the first time, surely, that that had ever happened.

I let it bide. It wasn't my scene; and anyway, I'd been placed next to a startling lovely Swedish girl who'd given up modeling to work with horses. Because it was more honest. Her current problem was disposing of two tons of manure. I nodded. I'd worked in advertising, too, on the agricultural side; it had given me an abiding sense of rural priorities.

I got a few minutes with the great man later on. "Sammy," I said — I'd already been ticked off for using his official title — "What the hell *is* that thing up there?" We were standing in an alcove of the Great Hall, staring up at the hill. Oddly, it was still visible. Although it was full night. Almost as if the sky above it were luminous.

"Search me," he said. He ran a hand through his curly mop of hair.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Fortress, obviously. As for the Arthur bit. ..." he shrugged expressively.

I said, "Sub-Roman?" and he grinned.

He said, "You read too many good books."

It seemed I couldn't let it go. Obscurely, there was something there that was important. I said, "Shall we ever know? What do you reckon?"

He sucked at his cheroot. *"Rex quondam, rex futurat,"* he said. "Best leave him as a legend. He's happier that way." He shrugged. "Anyway, I prefer Guinevere," he said. "Far more complex character. Poor old Art was just the fall guy."

I said, *"Place aux dames. ..."*

Next morning switched on. Like a badly cut movie. I wasn't ready for it, but it seemed I still had to cope. I found my way down to the kitchen. Head cook and bottle washer was a little girl called Dot, who'd bred too many greyhounds and taken too many folk on trust and let one man too many get his leg across, and sorted herself out by taking her City and Guilds. She got me my breakfast, or so it seemed, by throwing a salmon steak into a dry pan and letting the Aga boil the oil away. They were out of season, surely (salmon, as well as Agas), but that's the way I recall it. As I was finishing, Her Ladyship came through. "Ran you to earth at last," she said. "Morning, Dot. Keith, there's somebody I want you to meet."

I got up. I was instantly conscious of towering. Mainly because she was so small. I'd never seen anything quite as beautiful, though. She was wearing boots and a full, suede skirt; a tiny, frank little blouse. Her face was piquant, vivid-eyes; and there was a mane of tumbing dark brown hair. I said, "Sorry?" and she grinned at me.

She said, "I don't believe it. You haven't changed a bit. ..."

I said, "Wish I could say the same. ..." I hugged her, and she hugged me back. I couldn't place her scent, but it was right. Piquant and delicate. The proper thing for a London girl to wear.

I held her at arms length. I said, "Richenda?"

She said, "The same."

I grinned as well. Meetings like that don't happen, after all; there was magic in it, a quality of unreality. I said "You used to be a squidgy little thing. ..."

"Jods and a hard hat," she said. "Haunting the gymkhanas. Sorry, Marge. ..."

"Feel free," said Her Ladyship. She seemed to be amused.

"Do you remember Guzzle?" I said. "The wizardest pony on earth?"

"Do I not?" she said. She chuckled. "Then my silly old collarbone bust." Which it had, though it hadn't been so funny at the time. I'd been the first to reach her, beaten her mum and dad; and she a white-faced scrapper, tight-lipped and holding her arm. "Damn," she'd said. "Oh, damn, damn,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

damn. ..." She'd wanted to run, to catch the blasted animal, and I'd held her back. She winced; and I felt the wave of pain.

I was still holding her. I remembered, and let go. "It isn't you, of course," I said. "It can't possibly be."

Her eyes were dark and almond-shaped. "Probably isn't," she said. "Don't forget the seven-year itch. The chemicals have changed twice over." She looked round. "What a lovely room," she said. "I could live here. And forget the rest. Who painted all the plumbing?"

"Dot," I said, "this is Richenda. I've known her since before she was thought of. Dot's the chef," I added, perhaps unnecessarily.

But Richenda had already taken it in. Like a good pro will. Where did she hail from, how long had she trained, how long had she been here? Was it her first job? "It might make a series," she said, half-apologetically. 'Upstairs, Downstairs, Modern Style.' Would you mind, Marge?"

"There's no Upstairs and Downstairs in this house," said Marjorie. "Only flights of steps."

Later Richenda said, "I want to go into town. I still haven't finished my shopping. Would you like to come?"

"Christmas Eve," I said. "It'll be packed. ... Yes, please," I said when she started to look troubled. "I haven't finished mine, either. ..."

The high hills were frosted suddenly; and the sun pink, against a pinkish sky. Her rebuilt MGB was scarlet; it complemented the winter palette. Beneath High Tor a blond girl was riding a horse. She was too far off for me to be sure, but I guessed it was the Swede. I waved, and she waved back.

Richenda glanced up, frowning. She said, "That was King Arthur's palace."

"Best ask Sammy Farnham about that."

"Is he down yet?"

"Yes. Very nice bloke, as a matter of fact. Had a chat with him last night."

"We could do a feature on it," she said thoughtfully. "Do you think he'd give an interview?"

"Do you mean you've brought your recorder?"

She took a bend. She said, "Am never without it."

"And I bet you never climb Mont Blanc without a bottle of Dr. Collis-Brown's."

She changed back up. "Quite so," she said solemnly. "I'm really here, you know," she said. "It really is me. I'm always here. But then, you knew that already."

"How can you tell?"

She said, "I've read your books."

There were rooftops on the horizon. Also frost mantled. Suddenly I didn't want the journey to end. But no journey ever really ends. Any more than it begins. I said, "So you work for the EBC?"

She turned her nose up. She said,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It makes a few bob." She glanced sideways. The dark brown, almond eyes again. She said, "I like it, actually. I suppose I've done pretty well."

"What was that blasted ship of yours called? *Caroline*?"

She shook her head. "That was the first lot. We went legal. Well, as legal as you can get."

Something was catching at my throat. *Because* she was there, *because* time passes, *because* her hands were on the wheel rim. That was daft, though. I said, "You'd like my editor."

"Sorry?"

"Graham," I said. "Graham Byfleet."

"What's so special about him?"

"He likes his ale."

She sniffed. She said, "Typical. ..." She rounded the last bend, and a lorry passed with a roar. She slowed for the restriction signs. She said, "There'll be a good old frost later on. Have you got the big bedroom?"

"Yes," I said. "Well, pretty big, anyway. How are your folks?"

"Fine," she said. "You'll have to come down and see us sometime. Cards are very well."

I said, "I had a bit of a sticky time. Got a car again only last month."

"Hearts and flowers," she said. "Whoops. ..."

"What's that?"

"We nearly missed the car park. Got ten pence?"

I bought some baccy. I'd taken up a pipe again; I was working at it conscientiously. She found a blouse and skirt she said would do for Marge, and some knickers with rude slogans on them. Later she darted aside, into a gunsmith's-cum-TV shop. They were offering a nice line in flintlock table lighters. "If you're going to be vulgar," she said composedly, "there's no point half doing it." She paid by credit card. Later she examined a dolphin door knocker. Turned it upside down and found it was a phony. She trotted on again, which was fine by me. I'd have followed her all day. She'd dressed in jacket and jeans, a sweater, but she still looked elegant. She'd have looked elegant in anything though, even a sack. Complete with TATE AND LYLE across the front.

We found a pub eventually. Long bar, brass and copper samovar dispensing toddies. We weaved our way through the crush, and she perched on the one spare stool. She said, "Isn't it lovely?"

"What?"

She wriggled her shoulders. She said, "I like Christmas."

Suddenly I needed a recorder myself. Everything she said ought to be set down. I said, "What are you working on at the moment?"

She said, "I present for 'Caliban' You meet all sorts of folk."

I said, "I'll try to listen in."

She said, "I wish you would."

There was a band outside playing carols. The Sally Ann. I got her another Jamesons. Later she said, "We'd best

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be getting back." No particular reason, of course; but there spoke the Eternal Woman.

We walked in the afternoon, up to the great hill fort. Sammy came with us, and the old prof. The sun was low by that time; swelling and reddening, getting ready to plunge below the hills. The last few yards to the ramparts were unexpectedly steep. She took my arm. Her touch was electric somehow. Sammy Farnham raised his eyebrows, and she grinned.

"It's all right," she said. "He's my uncle."

She'd charmed them both, of course, by that time. Got them eating out of her hand. They showed her where the trial trenches had been cut, the postholes that proved the battlements had been timber-reinforced. There were stores of slingstones, farther on some burial pits. Cremation material was already in the States, undergoing carbon dating. The prof explained the system to her, and she sniffed and showed her mettle.

She said, "Don't forget the correction tables."

He looked put out. He said, "What correction tables?"

She was the picture of innocence. "I heard there're some people in California," she said. "Spend all their time counting tree rings." She smiled up at him. "I'm sorry," she said. "Are you a diffusionist?"

Sammy had become grave. I gathered from his lack of expression he wasn't far from an attack of the croup.

The hill, the enclosure, was hogbacked, too. Rough with grass. At the high point were more trenches, crisscrossing. The professor plowed ahead. "Postholes," he said. "And again, here. See 'em? We think it was a granary."

She stiffened suddenly. "No," she said faintly. "A temple. ..."

Sammy was instantly attentive. "What did you say, my love?"

She put a hand to her forehead. Swayed. I grabbed her. He said again, "What did you say?"

"I ... " she said. "I ... say?"

"About a temple."

"I didn't," she said. "Did I?"

"To what god?"

"There was blood," she said. *"There's blood still. ..."*

I waved my hand to quiet him. Then I pointed. "Look, love," I said. "There's Marge's house. See all the lights on? They're getting ready for the party."

She pressed her face against my shoulder. She was trembling. "Keith," she said, "take me home. Please take me home. ..."

Later Sammy took the opportunity to have a word. What he had to say didn't make me feel any better. "Psychometry?" I said. "I've read about it in books."

He shook his head.

"Look," I said angrily, "she's a pretty little girl. That's all. I don't buy the rest." Truth was, I didn't want her hurt. Not that way. The collarbone

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had been bad enough. "Leave her alone," I said.

He frowned. He said. "She's a dangerous little girl."

"To whom?" I said coldly.

He said softly, "Herself." He paused. He said, "Do you know her well?"

I said, "She's just become my goddaughter."

Other guests had arrived throughout the day. An MP whose face I'd seen often enough on the box; Richenda's head of production, a burly, blond-bearded giant who looked like a Viking berserker but who they said was a computer merchant to rival Carrera himself. With their wives and girlfriends, the house was full. A great tree had been brought in and decorated; presents gathered beneath it in bright, gay-ribboned drifts. Marge scurried from place to place, supervising this, ordering that, seeing that the glasses were charged; the MP told scurrilous tales about the Opposition back bench; the Viking boomed in the corner, expounding solemnly and at length the philosophy of firmware. It was all very happy and relaxed. But for some reason I felt uneasy.

I think Sammy Farnham was the same. Twice I saw him glance, frowning, through the tall windows: at the high hill, shadowed now, the mumblings of turf and stone. The place where once there had been blood; no, where there was blood still. The blood she'd seen, which had made her start to cry. The second time, I caught his eyes; but if that was really in his mind, he didn't speak of it again. I was having trouble with a nasty thought of my own: that if you dug through the skin of a place like that, crisscrossed it as they had done with trenches, something might boil to the light that was better hidden. Like the moving stones in Golding's ghastly pit.

Carol singers came, children from the local village choir. The Magi rode, the heralds sang, three galleons curtsied to the Lord. The children clustered round the fire afterward, eating mince pies and drinking lemonade. Their rector, a tall, vivid-faced young man, stood to one side, smiling and sipping sherry. For some reason I felt an urgent need to talk to him. But what could I say? That Richenda had been frightened on the hill, seen something that wasn't there? That had probably never been there? What could he do, to protect her from a daydream?

If anything, the mood intensified through the evening. Dinner was served: a superb starter, followed by the simplest and grandest of dishes. Venison, marinaded to perfection and served with delicate vegetables. Dot was summoned from the kitchen, curtsied, blushing, to the applause; but I'd found my appetite had gone. I'd been in Oxford the week before, spent an hour wandering the covered

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

market behind the Turl. They sell game there, by the carcass; the deer and hares hung in their lines, each disemboweled, each with a bloody crater where once had been a scut. The image intruded, monstrously; and finally I pushed my plate away.

I'd been placed between Richenda and the Swedish girl. I couldn't have wanted better company; but I was still relieved when the table rose, the smoking lamp was lit. I was buttonholed, instantly, by the computer man. To my surprise, he'd read some of my books; and he had a question for me. "Tell me," he said "do you really find life as complicated and dangerous as your characters?"

"Yes," I said, "I do," and he nodded, beaming. As if I'd confirmed a theory already constructed.

"Afraid you might," he said. "Yes, I was afraid you might. ..."

Cars were laid on for midnight Mass. I probably wouldn't have bothered, but Richenda wanted to go. We drove to the village along frost-mantled roads. Finally the church showed ahead, light streaming through rich-stained windows. She turned her collar up and took my arm. Walking to the lych-gate, I was sure I felt her tremble. I said, "What's wrong, love, you can tell me," but she shook her head.

"I'm all right," she said. "Just got a bit cold, that's all. It's a sharp one tonight, isn't it?"

They were unexpectedly High Church, for an English village, at least. There was even a rood loft. When she left me to kneel at the rail, I experienced another of those faint but definite shocks. The robed figures moved slowly, hands cupped; I saw her bow her head. *"Eat, for this is my body. ... Drink, for this is my blood. ..."* Then the deer were hanging again, gory, hoofless, and without their heads.

I don't know what time it was I awoke. I sat up, the dream still ringing in my mind; and the room was wrong, light slanting differently, no door where the door should be. I fell back, panting, and remembered: the phone call from Marge, the drive down, all that had happened since. I tried to see my watch, but I couldn't make out the dial. The wee small, certainly; but still, beyond the curtains, was the light.

I frowned. Surely there was something else, too: a deep note, pitched at the threshold of audibility, that seemed almost to vibrate the room. Like an organ, jammed on a near-subsonic cipher.

Suddenly I was wide awake. I was out of the bed and across the room in a flash. I yanked at the curtains and groaned. Because the land itself was glowing, under the blackened sky. The lawns, the trees beyond, the hill. It was as if I stared at some sort of ghastly negative. The frost lay sparkling, thick; over it, the only moving thing, trudged a solitary figure. I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pounded at the glass. *"No,"* I shouted. *"Richenda, no. Not up there. ..."* She turned momentarily, but she seemed dazed; she hunched her shoulders, trudged on again. Passed into the shadow of the trees, and was gone from sight.

I dressed with desperate speed. What was in my mind I couldn't rightly say. A notion, however vague, of calling; something she had summoned, which in turn had summoned her. I'd heard its voice; and so had she. I grabbed a car torch, ran back through the house. Only one person I wanted; and I thought I knew his room. I reached it, hammered. "Clive," I yelled. "Clive McDermott. *Clive. ..."*

The door opened abruptly. He was fully dressed, still with a glass in his hand; on the table lay a pile of glossy manuals. He said, "What the hell," and I pointed.

"The hill," I said. *"She's gone to the hill. ..."*

He ran to the curtains, parted them. He said, "Mother of God." He grabbed a heavy walking stick. He said, "Come on. ..."

I followed him. For all his bulk, he moved fast. The torchlight jiggled on the stairs, and the Great Hall was ahead. I wrenched at the door bolts, and the wind swirled in, lifting my hair. Snow crystals swirled; and he set off again, once more at the run. Computers were forgotten.

By the time we cleared the trees, I was out of breath; but there was no stopping. Tackling the first slope of the hill, I dropped the torch. It went out; but by that time we didn't need it. It seemed the glow came from the land itself; as if beneath us burned a fire so monstrous the rocks themselves had been made translucent by it. Monstrous, but icy cold; for the wind still swirled and zipped, the frost still lay. Thicker here than ever.

At the bend of the path, we stopped involuntarily. Because where there had been rounded banks of turf now stood a frowning battlement. Torches burned at intervals round its circumference, a drum was beating, and the whole place flocked with men. The faces stared down, masked and helmeted; there were swords and axes, the flame-lit tips of spears.

It was too late; we had already been seen. We were surrounded, dragged roughly forward. A gate squealed back; we were hustled through. Beyond, a pathway was lined with huts; more flame light showed from each low doorway. There was a scurry and bustling, a running to and fro. Armor clattered, and weapons; while from somewhere rose a wailing where women already keened the dead.

Beyond again, dim-glimpsed, was a longer, taller building; deep-eaved and barbaric. Skulls decorated its doorposts, hung grinning from the lintel. I wrenched back, but it was useless. I was propelled inside, landed on hands and knees.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

There were rushes, yielding and thick. Wall hangings moving in the wind, torches that smoked and flickered. Women, richly dressed, who whimpered and crouched; boy servants, all but nude; and a solitary strange detail. A trapped bird that fluttered and panicked under the steep-pitched roof.

My eyes were stinging. But I made out a throne of sorts. On it sat the queen of that strange place. Not Guinevere, not Jenny Yellowhair. Her hair tumbled darkly to her shoulders, a cloak was drawn to her throat, and she wore a crown of iron and uncut emeralds.

I limped forward, the huge Celt at my side. "Richenda," I said, "come home."

For a moment it seemed she hadn't heard me. Then she turned a pale face. "I am home," she said dully. "I was always home."

"Richenda," I said desperately, "this isn't a joke." I grabbed her wrist. "Can't you understand?" I said. "There aren't any microphones. Not anymore. You don't have a producer now. There isn't anybody to cut the tape. Whatever happens. ..." Din sounded from outside, and I pointed. "Richenda," I said, "this place is under siege. You haven't got very long. We've none of us got long. ..."

She said, "It was ordained," and I shook her.

"Nothing's ordained," I said. "Nothing's ever ordained. Richenda, it's not *real*. None of it's real." I shook her again. "The studio's real. And the Garden. London' s real. ..." I built images for her, thrust them at her: The Eeb, the rock groups prancing in St. Paul's Church porch; tall buildings of the Opera House, the Floral Hall; sunlight, the traffic in the Strand. It was as if I could oppose the dream, or fantasy, by my will alone, drag her back to where I wanted her to be. "You don't belong here," I said. "You *don't*. ..." It was useless, though. The deep note was roaring again, all but shaking the ground; and she shook her head dazedly.

"It's too late," she said. "It was too late before I was born. ..."

The noise rose to a peak, and the door burst inward. Screams sounded from her tiring-maids; a spear flew, struck thrumming and quivering. Sparks whirled; and the Scot leapt away, snatched up a sword and mighty targe. Then it seemed my vision fragmented, so that actions became spasmodic, a jerking series of eight-frame holds. A man doubled over; another crashed backward, forehead crushed by the shield rim. Other defenders scurried forward, only to vanish under the writhing press of bodies. More men and more thrust into the hall; and I understood at last. A sin was to be expunged, or fresh-committed.

The pitch, which seemed the voice of the place itself, clicked off. In the sudden silence the crackles of a burn-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing building sounded clear. The soldiers paced forward. Swords were in their hands, their hair fell to their shoulders, and their faces held no expression. They formed a semicircle, a pace or two from the dais. Richenda rose slowly. She stared at them, each in turn, but she didn't speak. She swung away finally, pressed her face to my shoulder. She said, "I'm sorry. ..."

A dagger snicked from its sheath. A further frozen moment; then the mob closed in.

A bell was ringing. I shot upright, and my arms were suddenly empty. I blinked and tried to focus. Held my watch close to my face and blinked again. Six-thirty.

Sunlight was coming through the curtains. I turned the alarm off, walked dully to the bathroom. Twice in a night; I must be more screwed-up than I'd thought. I showered and shaved. Halfway through I paused and cocked my head. There was a jangling. Distant somehow. Like voices, the noise of armor. And a deep throbbing that faded as I listened. But that was only the early morning traffic, grinding its way through town. I saw down below in the garden that the japonica was in bloom.

I dressed, wondered about an egg, and settled for coffee and a slice of toast. I checked the A to Z, just to be on the safe side, walked out to the coach stop. I was due in town at ten-thirty. I had an appointment with Marge Banks of the EBC and her presenter, Richenda Steuart. I wondered what they would be like.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fantasy & Science Fiction

MARKET PLACE

BOOKS-MAGAZINES

S-F FANTASY MAGAZINES, BOOKS. Catalog $1.00. Collections purchased (large or small). Robert Madle, 4406 Bestor Dr., Rockville, MD 20853.

SCIENTIFANTASY SPECIALIST: Books, magazines. 20¢ stamp for catalog. Gerry de la Ree, Cedarwood, Saddle River, NJ 07458.

100,000 SF and Mystery paperbacks, hardcovers, magazines in stock. Catalogs $1.00. PANDORA'S BOOKS, Box F-54, Neche, ND 58265.

SOFT BOOKS, 89 Marion Street, Toronto, Canada M6R 1E6. Howard Lovecraft, Arkham, Necronomicon, etc. bought/sold. Catalogues issued.

SEND 25¢ FOR CATALOG of Scientifantasy books & pulps. Canford, Drawer 216, Freeville, NY 13068.

CATCH COMET FEVER! Read HALLEY'S COMET, 1910: FIRE IN THE SKY by Jerred Metz. ($8.70 paper, $15.70 hard) Dept. E, Singing Bone Press, P.O. Box 1650, St. Louis, MO 63188. Phone orders for Mastercard and VISA at 314-569-9260.

SPECULATIVE FICTION hardcover first editions. Catalogs issued. DMK BOOKS, 22946 Brenford, Woodland Hills, CA 91364.

HAVE YOU MISSED ME? I've published WEIRDBOOK since 1968, plus other things you'll like. Get catalog and FREE sample FANTASY MONGERS QUARTERLY (stamp appreciated). W. Paul Ganley, Publisher, Box 149, Buffalo, NY 14226.

FOREIGN EDITIONS OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION. Copies of French, German, Spanish, Japanese and Swedish editions available at $2.50 each, three for $7.00. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY Catalog, O-P 1st Edition Hardcovers. OTHERWORLDS, 23834 Wendover, Beachwood, OH 44122.

HARDCOVER SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY. Reasonable Prices. Free Lists. Norman Syms, 8 Broadmoor Vale, Upper Weston, Bath, Avon, England BA1 4LP.

SCIENCE FICTION COLLECTION. Free Catalog. Low Prices. Rudy's Books, 8041 Port Royale Dr., San Diego, Ca. 92126.

OUT-OF-PRINT Books Found. Send Wants. SF/Occult Catalogues $1.00 each. Booklook, 51F Maple Ave., Warwick, NY 10990.

BOUGHT, SOLD, TRADED, SF&F hardbounds, pulps, digests. Send 2 stamps for gigantic 15,000 item catalog. Graham Holroyd, 19 Borrowdale Dr., Rochester, NY 14626.

SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY. Free catalogs of pulps, digests, paperbacks, hardcovers. Collections also purchased. Ray Bowman, Box 5845F, Toledo, Ohio 43613.

CLOTHING

F&SF T-SHIRTS. Navy blue with original magazine logo imprinted in white OR: Red shirt with blue logo. Sm, med, large, extra-large. $7.00 each. Mercury Press, Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

GAMES/PUZZLES

TRIVEAX: THREE COMPUTERIZED Science Fiction Games. Over 5500 questions in Encyclopedia Intergalactica and Galactic Survey, plus Beat the Dragon (hangman). IBM PC/Clones, $39.99 MC/Visa/Chk. TESSERA, Rt 6, Box 338K6, Columbia SC 29210.

20% OFF FANTASY GAMES and miniatures. Send $2.00 for illustrated catalog, refundable with $10.00 order. The Fantasy Apothecary, Box 19302, Orlando, Florida 32814.

Do you have something to advertise to sf readers? Books, magazines, typewriters, telescopes, computers, space-drives, or misc. Use the F&SF Market Place at these low, low rates: $15.00 for minimum of ten (10) words, plus $1.50 for each additional word. Frequency discount: 10% for six consecutive insertions, 15% for twelve consecutive insertions. Send copy and remittance to: Adv. Dept., Fantasy and Science Fiction, P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, CT 06753.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MISCELLANEOUS

ESP LAB. This new research service group can help you. For FREE information write: Al G. Manning, ESP Lab of Texas, Box 216, Edgewood, TX 75117.

SF/FANTASY NOTECARDS, stationary, posters. Gorgeous art, reasonable prices, all new artists. Illustrated catalog $2 (refundable). Griffin #D-3, P.O. Box 70128, Reno, NV 89570.

1,000,000 VIDEOTAPES/SOUNDTRACKS! Video catalog: $1.00. Soundtrack catalog: $1.00. RTSFSF, Box 1829, Novato, California 94948.

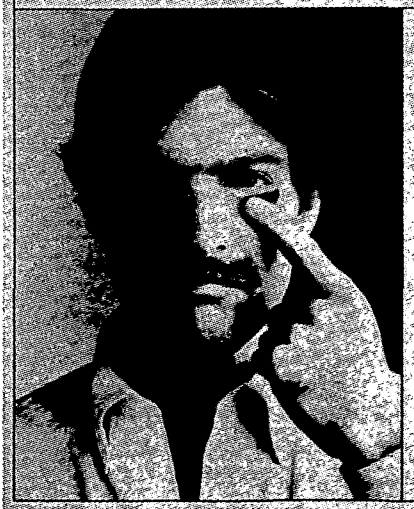
INVENTIONS, IDEAS, TECHNOLOGY WANTED! Industry presentation/national exposition. 1-800-528-6050. X831.

SPACE TRAVELER CLUB — Illustrated tour of our neighborhood of stars, product catalog and more! A new adventure in science fiction and fact. For information package, send $1, Space Traveler Club, Dept F-1, Box 2993, Hollywood, CA 90078.

BE WEALTHY. Start Own Business. Free Information. Johnson, NHCO, Box 7191, Federal Way, WA 98003..

HALLEY'S COMET, TIE TAC or Stick Pin. Four color enamel and beautiful. $6.95 postpaid. Schneider, Box 64, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

WE'RE FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE
American Heart Association



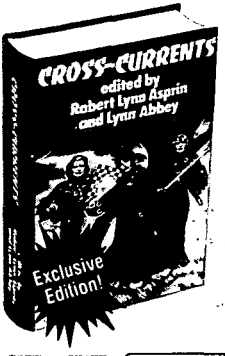
I'D RATHER QUIT THAN FIGHT HEART DISEASE.

Don't let smoking knock you out. Quit today. And give yourself a fighting chance. When you stop smoking you are helping decrease your risk of heart disease. In fact, the Surgeon General has stated that cigarette smoking is the most preventable risk factor in heart disease.

So fight back against heart disease. Quit smoking. For more information on how you can stop smoking contact the American Heart Association.

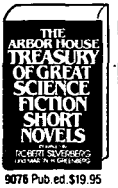
MW85-5c (7" w. x 5" d.)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



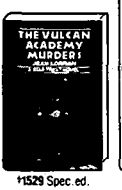
YOURS FREE WITH MEMBERSHIP CROSS-CURRENTS

Enter Thieves' World! Giant 3-in-1 collection brings you *Storm Season*, *The Face of Chaos* and *Wings of Omen*.

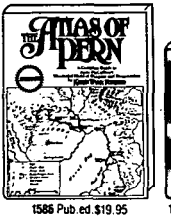


9076 Pub.ed.$19.95

1768 Spec.ed.



†1529 Spec.ed.



1586 Pub.ed.$19.95

1585 Pub.ed.$12.95

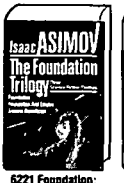
1701 Spec.ed.

1644 Pub.ed.$16.95

1420 Includes the First, Second, and Third Books. Spec.ed.

1784 The Space Merchants; The Merchants' War. Comb.pub.ed.$25.90

0943 Another Fine Myth; Myth Conceptions; Myth Directions; Hit or Myth. Spec.ed.



6221 Foundation; Foundation and Empire; Second Foundation. Pub.ed. $17.95

0075 The First 5 Amber Novels. 2 vols. Comb. pub.ed.$32.30

And take 4 more for $1 WITH MEMBERSHIP

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR ADDITIONAL SELECTIONS.

How the Club works:

You'll receive your choice of any 4 books for only $1 (plus shipping and handling) and a free copy of *Cross-Currents* after your application for membership is accepted. We reserve the right to reject any application. However, once accepted as a member, you may examine the books in your home and, if not completely satisfied, return them within 10 days at Club expense. Your membership will be cancelled and you'll owe nothing. The FREE book will be yours to keep whether or not you remain a member.

About every 4 weeks (14 times a year), we'll send you the Club's bulletin, *Things to Come*, describing the 2 coming Selections and a variety of Alternate choices. In addition, up to 4 times a year you may receive offers of special Selections, always at low Club prices. If you want the 2 Selections, you need do nothing; they'll be shipped automatically.

If you don't want a Selection, prefer an Alternate, or no book at all, just fill out the convenient form always provided and return it to us by the date specified.

We allow you at least 10 days for making your decision. If you do not receive the form in time to respond within 10 days and receive an unwanted Selection, you may return it at our expense.

As a member you need buy only 4 books at regular low Club prices during the coming year. You may resign any time thereafter or continue to enjoy Club benefits for as long as you wish. One of the 2 Selections each month is only $4.98. Other Selections are higher, but always much less than hardcover publishers' editions—up to 65% off. The Club offers more than 300 books to choose from. A shipping and handling charge is added to all shipments. Send no money now, but do mail the coupon today!

Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices.

†Copyright © 1984 by Paramount Pictures Corporation. STAR TREK is A Trademark Of Paramount Pictures Corporation Registered In The U.S. Patent And Trademark Office. All Rights Reserved.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®

Dept. AS-100, Garden City, N.Y. 11530

I want the best SF in or out of this world! Please accept my application for membership in the Science Fiction Book Club. Send me the 4 books whose numbers I have indicated in the boxes below plus my FREE book and bill me just $1 (plus shipping and handling). I agree to the Club Plan as described in this ad. I will take 4 more books at regular Club prices in the coming year and may resign any time thereafter. The FREE book will be mine to keep whether or not I remain a member. SFBC offers serious works for mature readers.

FREE BOOK #1354	1.	2.	3.	4.

Mr.
Ms._____
(Please print)

Address_____ Apt. #_____

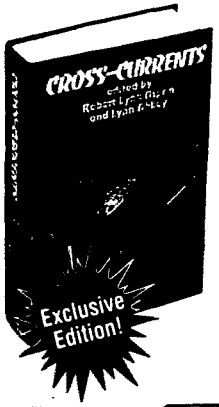
City_____

State_____ Zip_____

If under 18, parent must sign._____

The Science Fiction Book Club offers its own complete hardbound editions sometimes altered in size to fit special presses and save you even more. Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members will be serviced from Canada. Offer slightly different in Canada. 53-S005

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



YOURS FREE
WITH MEMBERSHIP
CROSS-CURRENTS

Enter Thieves' World! Giant 3-in-1 collection brings you *Storm Season, The Face of Chaos* and *Wings of Omen.*

0109 Pub.ed.$16.95 | 1099 Pub.ed.$15.95 | 1271 Pub.ed.$14.95 | *1154 Spec.ed. | 1339 Pub.ed.$15.95 | 0638 Spec.ed.

1131 Spec.ed. | 3533 Pub.ed.$15.95 | 1552 Pub.ed.$14.95 | 1776 Pub.ed.$12.95 | 1628 Spec.ed. | 1636 Spec.ed.

THE HARPER HALL OF PERN
Anne McCaffrey
THE ELRIC SAGA Part 1
THE ELRIC SAGA PART II
The Retarned King
THE BELGARIAD PART ONE
THE BELGARIAD PART TWO

0992 Dragonsong; *Dragonsinger*; Dragondrums. Comb.pub.ed. $38.85

0752 Elric of *Melnibone*; The Sailor on the Seas of Fate; The Weird of the White Wolf. Spec.ed.

1172 The Vanishing *Tower*; The *Bane* of the Black Sword; Stormbringer. Spec.ed.

1461 The Goblin *Tower*; The Clocks of Iraz; The Unbeheaded King. Spec.ed.

1719 Pawn of *Prophecy*; Queen of Sorcery; Magician's Gambit. Spec.ed.

1669 Castle of Wizardry; Enchanter's End Game. Spec.ed.

AND TAKE 4 MORE FOR $1
WITH MEMBERSHIP

See other side for coupon and additional Selections.

SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB®

53-S005

*Explicit scenes and/or language may be offensive to some.

Note: Prices shown are publishers' edition prices.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED